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VASSALLI, A MAN OF IDEAS

We take pride in being an independent nation but many do not seem to know what in fact independence and nationhood mean. To many these two words are no more than a slogan or claptrap. I wonder how many know that the first Maltese to think of his country under the heels of a despotic ruler in terms of a nation was a scholar from Haż-Żebbuġ, by name Mikiel Anton Vassalli.

Lately the man in the limelight for political reasons has been Manwel Dimech, a comparatively minor figure, whose bronze statue faces the Auberge de Castille, but many years before him a better educated and learned man of untarnished reputation which rests on solid scholarship had already addressed his countrymen as the citizen of a Maltese nation in the *preface* to his dictionary when Bonaparte landed in Italy. That was in 1796.

Courage and Vision

Only a man of great moral courage and vision could refer to his country as a nation when, in fact, it was not so because it was despotically governed by the Order of St. John, a brilliant Order with splendid chronicles of heroic achievements but certainly not a liberal government at all. There were no liberal governments at that time.

In those illiberal days, it was very dangerous to propagate ideas of national consciousness. The political atmosphere of Europe was charged with the dynamics of daring ideas released from the minds of the French encyclopaedists who were all out to replace the old regime with a new order in which every citizen would be free, everyone equal and everyone a comrade or brother to another.

This was the banner unfurled by the french Revolution but the high winds of human passions tore it to pieces. But the seminal ideas struck root and a frightened despotic order was suspicious of anyone who showed sympathy for the newfangled ideas of the French Revolution.

Man of ideas

Mikiel Anton Vassalli was not a timid scholar who lived in an ivory tower compiling grammars and a dictionary; he was also a man of ideas; progressive ideas can be dangerous. All despots hated men of ideas. They stand in the way of any tyranny. To the Order of St. John, Vassalli was a dangerous man. And, in fact, the Order was right.

The *raison d'etre* of the Order of St. John was, historically, a state of perpetual feud with the Moslems and Vassalli told the Grandmaster of the time, De Rohan, that it was time the Order stopped the piratical war with the Moslems and started commercial relations with North Africa.

The wheel in our time has turned full circle in the direction advocated by far-sighted Vassalli. Moslems and Maltese Christians, instead of fighting one another for the greater glory of *Alla*, are now trying to understand one another and do business together.

The Order of St. John was essentially aristocratic, constitutionally monarchic (the Grandmaster was the Sultan) with its members recruited from the flower of European aristocracy. Knights from the different constituent nations had their own auberges, but the Maltese had no auberge. They were not regarded 'noble' enough to qualify for an auberge of their own. Vassalli thought all this was dated nonsense and he insisted on the Order creating and maintaining an auberge also for Maltese knights.

Imprisoned for life

When Vassalli knew that the Order of St John would not budge an inch, he turned against it, stuck out his neck, siding with the French, and was imprisoned for life and exiled himself after having succeeded in escaping from prison and fled the country; he returned with the French army when Napoleon kicked Hompesch, the last of the Grandmasters, out of the island.

Vassalli was pro-French. Now to be pro-French under the Order of St. John, the very negation of the liberal ideas advocated by the French encyclopaedists, was to be ultra liberal and against dictatorship. Vassalli was an idealist and all idealists make mistakes. Like all idealists, he must be judged by his good faith. He thought that the French would liberate Malta from the shackles of the Order of St. John. The French revolution was hailed as the herald of freedom all over Europe whenever the ancient regime stifled the freedom of the masses and their leaders.

Freedom of mind

Vassalli who seemed to have had a late vocation for a religious life and had followed a course of philosophical, ideological and oriental studies in Rome, made up his mind to give the masses that freedom of mind which comes with knowledge. Malta was then a nation of illiterates. How could illiterates ever know their rights and break the chains that bound them hand and foot in slavery? The quickest method of freeing an enslaved mind is by enlightening it; but to do so one must first replace illiteracy with literacy; how could otherwise the masses pass from a state of ignorance to knowledge?

For this reason he appealed to the people of Malta, their leaders in a particular manner, to learn their own language, cultivate it and use it as a means of self-education. The only serious linguistic study before him was that of Agius de Soldanis who wrote a grammar of the language in 1750 and compiled a still unpublished dictionary.

Vassalli's dictionary

To fill in the gap, he wrote two grammars, one in Latin and another in Italian. Later, he undertook the systematic compilation of a Maltese-Italian-Latin dictionary. Though it is not a perfect dictionary (there are no perfect dictionaries anywhere), considering

that it was compiled only 41 years after Samuel Johnson's, one cannot help admiring the linguistic seriousness of his enterprise. He, Vassalli, is a man of vision who was born before his time. His century, at least in Malta, was intellectually very low, debased by the superstition and ignorance of the neglected masses. Freedom was a suspicious word which made the ruling authorities clamp down on whoever uttered it in too loud a voice. The Order of St John regarded Malta as its own fief and people as the humble servants of the Sultan, and woe to him who ever dared question such authority. The serfs had only to obey. But Vassalli challenged authority and he paid for it.

The Church was very rigid and very harsh in the infliction of disciplinary measures. Vassalli incurred the displeasure of the Church because he dared translate the New Testament into Maltese for the Christian Missionary purposes. Our Church did not translate the Bible into Maltese. There was a sort of fear that the Bible in translation could give rise to false interpretations as had happened in Germany and England; so the Church was satisfied with the Latin translation of the vulgate for the educated, but for the masses no more than a few occasional quotations generally in Latin in the sermons delivered by priests in the parish churches.

When Vassalli died, his widow did not know what to do with his corpse. His parish priest refused him burial in consecrated ground. The local representative of the Christian Missionary Society had him interred at Ta' Braxia Cemetery, though Vassalli had never apostatized. Hard times which were lacking both in charity, Christian love and understanding. Vassalli had few Maltese friends we know of, but he was lucky to have the friendship and patronage of John Hookham Frere, a diplomat and distinguished classical scholar, who not only encouraged him in his studies but enabled him to give a series of lectures on the Maltese language in our University for which he paid him an *honorarium* out of his own pocket.

A pioneer

Vassalli is the man who I think unfurled the banner of Maltese freedom for the first time paving the way to other patriots who followed in his footsteps—a patriot and scholar, a man of seminal ideas who advocated the setting up of schools in the villages (education for the masses), recommended the translation of the Laws of Malta into Maltese, and a greater use of the Maltese language by the Church also for religious purposes. Unfortunately Vassalli's name carried such a stigma because of his hobnobbing with Protestants and translating a bible for them into Maltese. Maltese historians either omitted his name completely, a sort of taboo, or made just a casual reference to him.

But the whirligig of time has now restored his full stature. Who knows, perhaps Vassalli will one day have his own bronze statue facing the Auberge de Castille with his rallying call *Alla Nazione Maltese*, for national unity rooted in our Maltese identity.