

AN EPILOGUE FOR A FEW MALTESE CORSAIRS: VASSALLI, PRIVATEERS AND COTTON

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In my very early days of researching about the Maltese corsairs I set about uncovering the very fabric of the characters of the commerce raiders that used Malta as their base in the 18th century. The local corsairs were intertwined into a colourful weave that was not only Malta but the Mediterranean and Europe in the late 18th century. The corsairs were no peculiarity of an insular society. They were the product of their time. The late 18th century flung them not only into seaborne raids around the Mediterranean but also into ever changing European politics. They lived in an enlightened Europe that was slowly festering into revolution.

The corsairs operating from Malta were quite a few. They formed part of a harbour community.¹ For long I had suspected that the higher echelons of this community including officers, captains, shipwrights, notaries and financiers of the corsair ships were involved in contemporary political affairs. Nonetheless little evidence existed to substantiate my hypothesis. Along came a chance conversation with Dr. Olvin Vella in late 2014. On my mentioning of various peculiar names of a number of corsairs Captains, Dr. Vella in his usual emphatic style exclaimed: 'those names you mentioned! I think some left Malta with Vassalli in 1800!' Within days I was handed a number of lists and articles that started to put weight to a hibernating hypothesis. Vassalli in Corsica was accompanied by corsairs! Some of the most intrepid sea dogs of the late 18th century had been fellow Jacobins with Malta's foremost enlightened reformer Vassalli.² To set the stage for such an argument one must trace back some links to the last days of the Order's rule.

Many professed knights of the Order of St. John were heavily involved in the tribulations of the Religion's final years on Malta. In 1798 Fra Paul Jullien Suffren would be the last Knight to commandeer a ship flying the Order's flag out of Malta. He manoeuvred and tacked the 62-gun San Zaccaria and the 40 gun St. Elisabetta through a forest of French ships on his final approach to Malta in June of that faithful year. As he arrived he immediately took command of the defences of Senglea where he made use of the corsairs' military stores.³

'I had sent to ask for some cartridges from cottonera, they answered there were none and sent me bullets which were not of the right calibre. I then took on myself to open the private magazines and took the cartridges belonging to the corsairs and merchants'⁴

In the same way that Suffren was defending Malta and facing treason from within his same order, another knight was feigning doing his part in defending Malta. Fra De Gras Preville was in charge of the bays of St Julians and St Georges. In command of a detachment of Maltese Militia he simply welcomed the landing republican troops with open arms whilst waving a white handkerchief.⁵ Preville is the ideal candidate for us to start untying a web of intrigue that involves Vassalli and the Maltese corsairs. Preville himself had served aboard Maltese corsair ships; in 1795 he was in command of a private corsair galleot.⁶ He served both under the command and in tandem with the Mitrovich corsairs.⁷ On board the corsair

3 H.E. General Sir F.W. Grenfell, Malta in 1798 its capture by Napoleon, Malta 1902, Appendix B, VI.

4 Ibid.

5 NLM, Lib.269, f11.

6 NAV, Verballi: Chiappe Account 1795.

7 Liam Gauci, In the name of the Prince: Maltese Corsair 1760-98,

1 Liam Gauci, In the name of the Prince: Maltese Corsair 1760-98, Malta 2016, Chapter 2.

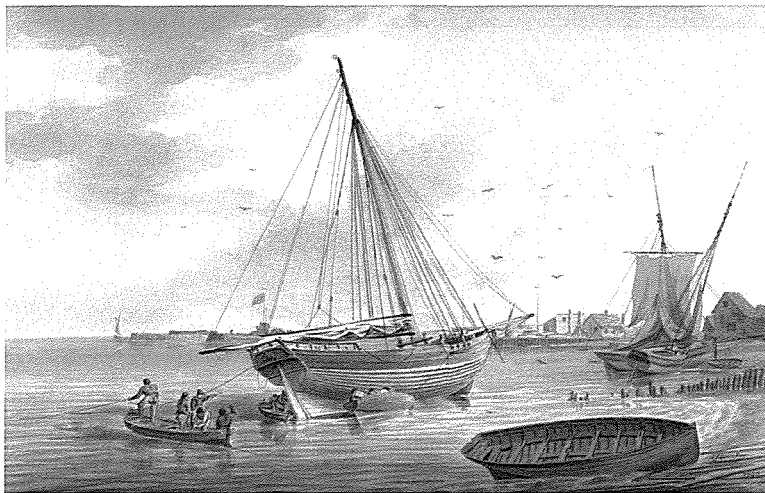
2 Frans Ciappara, Mikiel Anton Vassalli 1764-1829 An Enlightened Maltese Reformer, Malta 2014.





ship there was Giacomo Mitrovich a future French republican privateer. Preville in the name of his order sailed the Levant in search of prizes capturing and enslaving the enemies of the faith.

The same Preville, knight and corsair, appears to have also been heavily involved with the Jacobin party. His name is listed next to Vassalli in the police document that Dr. Ganado recently published.⁸ He was amongst those knights travelling to Paris who espoused the French cause in May 1798. So Preville certainly knew Vassalli; could this Corsair/Knight have been involved in the escape of Vassalli from Ricasoli? If Preville was able to return back to Malta in June 1798 to falsely defend his Order, could Vassalli have arrived earlier in Malta rather than with the French troops?⁹



Malta in 1798 went into shock. The once overlords of the island principality were overrun by General Bonaparte. Be it through treason, be it through sheer force, be it through the intervention of an intellectual middle class, or maybe a sprinkling of all three, the Directory in France succeeded in unfurling the tricolour above the ramparts of Malta. One man who physically helped the French troops invade Malta and guide them during the invasion was Angelo Calandri.¹⁰ A corsair by profession, Calandri was born in Rome but he had

lived in Senglea at least since 1786¹¹ with his wife Maria Luigia.¹² Although he never commandeered a corsair ship, Calandri was no ordinary corsair, he was able to read and write and had held high ranking positions on board. He served with Captain Gaetano Cavassa and Captain Zelalich. Both captains would play their part in the French interlude as we will see later. Calandri and his wife had accused Captain Zelalich of blasphemy

and sodomy in front of the inquisitional court.¹³ Little could the Inquisitor foretell back in 1795 that the witness before him, Angelo Calandri, would personally guide Republican troops that would spell the end of the Roman Inquisition in Malta.

The Inquisition was not the only change France brought with it. Immediately wholesale

changes were undertaken, some were welcomed, others misunderstood, and others in hindsight where not what Malta needed. Within months the French administrators and their sympathisers were feeling the wrath of a people whose island economy was in ruins. Principally the much awaited free trade with the east was not as successful, the tricolour at sea had many enemies and no merchant could feel safe with the Royal Navy infesting the Mediterranean. The much heralded Commission of Government representing the people, upheld by the tree of liberty, would bear no fruit. The placard affixed to the tree of liberty standing in the middle of Malta's capital had those exact seditious words slandered upon it only a day after the Quatorze Juillet.¹⁴

'Tree without fruit cap without a head little time is left for

Malta 2016, 35 and 71.

8 Albert Ganado, "A clue to Vassalli's destination after his 'escape' from Fort Ricasoli" (fl-istampa).
 9 The argument for this hypothesis stems from the fact that although Preville was in Paris on 16 May 1798 it is obvious that he had time to arrive in time to pre-empt the French invasion. Preville himself was also seen at the Magisterial Palace on the day of the French invasion. So could have Vassalli done the same? Carmel Testa, *The French in Malta*, Malta 1997, 94.
 10 Richard Spiteri, "Ġo Korsika ma' Eugène Fenech, missieru Kalčidon u ma' Vassalli" (fl-istampa).

11 NAV, Ruolli Box, 1786 Cavassa, No 17.
 12 In the list published by Alain Blondy, Calandri's wife is listed as Luigia. Refere to Alain Blondy, *L'Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle. Des dernières splendeurs à la ruine* (Paris, 2002). 499.
 13 Liam Gauci, *In the name of the Prince: Maltese Corsair 1760-98*, Malta 2016, 63.
 14 Frans Ciappara, *M.A. Vassalli 1764-1829*, Malta 2014, 94





you to reign'¹⁵

Malta was now on the brink of a quasi civil war. The sides were being drawn and the cinders of sedition glowed dangerously over the powder keg that was Malta in the summer of 1798. However before the revolution of September some corsairs still pursued their old profession. These Corsairs now had to change tack and raise a French flag instead of that of the Order of St. John. They immediately got to work in arming ships against British Merchantmen. Captain Giacomo Mitrovich son of Captain Giorgio Mitrovich and uncle to Giorgio Mitrovich the 19th century politician¹⁶ was arming a galleot of 30 benches.¹⁷ The former corsair, partner of the Knight Preville, immediately tried to curry favour with the Major General in command of Malta by naming his privateer ship the 'Vaubois'. His galleot was moored at Senglea at a place known as 'sotto la sirena',¹⁸ the galleot had a lion as a figurehead and it also carried a statue of the Madonna. Armed with two 3 pounder cannons and 4 swivel guns she was a small formidable commerce raider.

To arm such a privateer one needed a certain amount of capital and an assortment of investors. Amongst the investors there were Dr Peter Paul Muscat,¹⁹ Salvatore Bigliardelli son of Andrea an ex Corsair²⁰ and Anna Sacchet the widow of Stefano. The latter was an essential investor in Mitrovich's galleot. She invested 1000 scudi and was also to get 5% of the profits of the privateer. Investments kept pouring in until the 22nd of August 1798 only a few days before news arrived in Malta of the defeat of the French squadron at Aboukir.²¹ It was this news of a French naval defeat in the Levant that finally sparked off the revolution of thousands of Maltese against the French Republican government. In September 1798 Malta burst into flames. On both sides, Corsairs that had once served the grandmaster were pitted against each other. Today we are concerning ourselves with those that stood behind the walls of

Valletta in the name of France. They stood for *liberté e egailité*. For those behind the walls the liberty they had achieved only a few weeks before was not going to be given up that easily. These are some snippets of their struggles under siege.

Vassalli at this time is presumed to have entered Valletta possibly after leaving Zebbug in the early days of September.²² Disillusioned with being shunned for the post of tutor at the school of Arabic in July,²³ he was in Valletta by late September begging the French government to provide him with bread.²⁴ This man referred to by Napoleon as 'one of the most remarkable men of his country'²⁵ was given no real post of standing, no real say in how to run his country's republican government. The nation in which he had put all trust to overthrow his jailers of 1797 only offered him alms of bread. And bread was only granted to him on the intercession of Regnaud D'Angely, the French Commissioner. D'Angely holds the clues that help us understand even more what was befalling the Jacobins behind the walls of the besieged cities. D'Angely was a radical, a revolutionary bureaucrat who found himself in Malta only because he was too sick to continue the journey with General Bonaparte to Egypt.²⁶ He had survived Robespierre, and that was no mean feat. D'Angely's role in Malta was that of Commissioner of government. A contemporary Maltese diary described him as bizarre, superb and perverse.²⁷ Regnaud was only 3 years older than Vassalli. Vassalli considered D'Angely his benefactor²⁸ and one dares to say his friend. And so one question is palpable: why didn't he strive further to at least give a more important role to Vassalli in the French Administration? D'Angely had Bonaparte's ear, and we know that the two knew of Vassalli's talents. However thrown into the heart of all this was Bosredon Ransijat. The latter clashed on numerous occasions with D'Angely; furthermore there is no doubt that Ransijat, the former secretary to the Orders' treasury, knew Vassalli. Was Ransijat scared of Vassalli? Wasn't Vassalli fully

15 Lib.359, f84v note1.

16 Liam Gauci, In the name of the Prince: Maltese Corsairs 1760-98, Malta 2016, 71

17 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f251

18 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f327. This spot today is still known by the same name.

19 This Dr Peter Paul Muscat is probably the son of Uditore Nicola Muscat. Verbal communication with Profs. Frans Ciappara

20 AOM6532: 15 April 1793. Bigliardelli served both with the fleet of the Order of St. John and as a captain of various corsair ships.

21 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f353

22 Frans Ciappara, M.A. Vassalli 1764-1829, Malta 2014, 104

23 Frans Ciappara, M.A. Vassalli 1764-1829, Malta 2014, 105

24 Frans Ciappara, M.A. Vassalli 1764-1829, Malta 2014, 105

25 Hardman, A History of Malta during the French and British Occupation, Malta 1994, 66

26 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 107.

27 Stanley Fiorini, From the diary of a Priest in Senglea during the French Blockade, MH.8(1982)3(234-260) 240.

28 Alain Blondy, "Vassalli u r-refugjati Maltin, aġenti principali tal-kultivazzjoni tal-qoton fi Franza (1807-1814)", trad. Toni Aquilina, Dawl ġdid fuq Vassalli (Malta, 2004).





aware of the president of the commission of Government's role in the 1797 coup against Rohan? Hadn't Vassalli told his interrogators in 97 to ask Ransijat if they wished to know more about his intentions of the failed coup?²⁹ It was a complicated intricate piece of political machinations and Vassalli was being punished unknowingly for it.

The French Commissioner D'Angely was never a popular character and his actions simply made matters worse. He decided to leave Malta incognito and travel to France to get help and reinforcements. Both Vaubois and Ransijat were happy to see Vassalli's benefactor leave the island. On the night between the 9th and 10th November 1798 a black painted galleot of 36 men was put on the ready.³⁰ The galleot was owned³¹ and most probably captured by Captain Giuseppe Scolaro.

D'Angely eventually arrived in Paris and there he had bigger fish to fry. With General Bonaparte back from Egypt, the process to install the general as first Consul started.³² D'Angely would be a key cog in helping Napoleon become dictator of France.

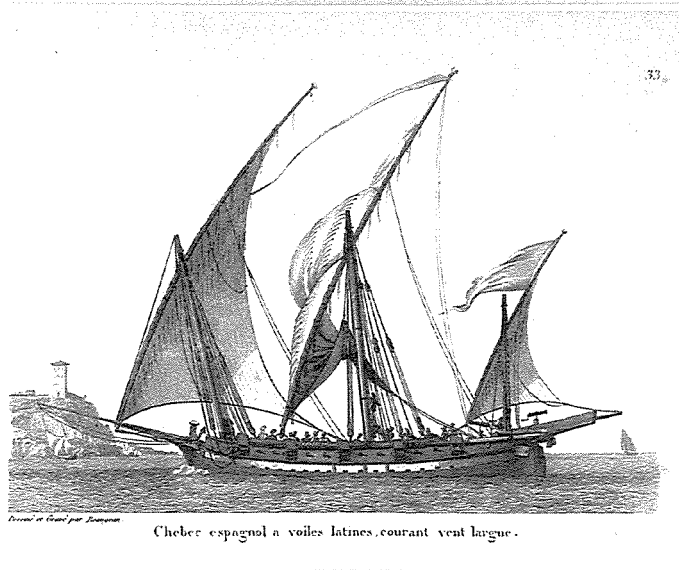
The siege and the blockade of Malta dragged on and things started to go from bad to worse for the French. The Maltese revolutionaries had asked for the help of Britain, Portugal and Naples, eventually all three came to the aid of Malta. There powerful fleets blockaded the harbour and the noose tightened round Republican Malta. In January 1799 Captain Guglielmo Lorenzi, a corsair by profession, found himself besieged in

Valletta. Living only a few metres away from Dun Mikiel Xerri, the two plotted to overthrow the Commission of Government and open the gates for the Maltese National Congress troops. The plan was thwarted.³³ The priest from Zebbug and the aged Corsair were shot as ring leaders of the conspiracy. Along with them many other collaborators were shot or else killed in the ensuing skirmishes with the French soldiers. The scuffles

within the walls were bloody and many Maltese Congress troops suffered terrible deaths. One of the discovered Maltese was hacked to pieces even after he had already been executed by a firing squad!³⁴

The war in Malta was degenerating into a bloodthirsty conflict. Lorenzi's house was vacated and given to Matteo Rizzo.³⁵ Rizzo an ex-Librarian and now the inspector of fisheries was allowed to take up lodging in the executed

corsair's house. He would not enjoy living in the house for long as within a year he had to escape to Corsica along with many other of his same ideals. Rizzo is of importance to us as he like many others of French leanings would roll the dice one last time in a final aggression against the Maltese revolutionary government. Rizzo was one of the many Maltese and Frenchmen that got together to arm a spononara against the Maltese outside the walls. 'Le Republicane' was an oared privateer, armed with swivel guns and 19 oars.³⁶ She was armed in a desperate attempt to harass and capture food or supplies for the besieged. The desperation of those arming such a ship is immediately obvious, when one takes into consideration



29 David Agius Muscat, 'Ex Dictis Vassalli', Il-Mument (4 July 2004), pp16 -17.

30 AOM6523C, f121.

31 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 412.

32 The Encyclopedia Britannica, Eleventh Edition, VOLXXIII, New York 1911, 46-47.

33 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 441-516 and Liam Gauci, In the name of the Prince: Maltese Corsairs 1760-98, Malta 2016, 79-82.

34 AOM6532C, f421.

35 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 492.

36 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f111v.





the amount of British, Portuguese and Neapolitan warships blockading Malta.

The main armatori of this intrepid enterprise were Lorenzo L'Hoste and Fortunato Isouard.³⁷ Their intrepidity needed more financial backing and so they went in search of investors for their Maltese Republican Privateer. The list of investors makes for some interesting reading: two of the Poussielgue brothers, one of whom, Matthieu, would eventually end up in Bouches-du-Rhone with the Maltese émigré in 1807,³⁸ the Frenchman Le Tellier Captain of the 'Carthaginoise',³⁹ the Frenchman Donnadiou – second in command of the Guillaume Tell,⁴⁰ Ransijat, Doublet, Giannina Isouard, Dr Benedetto Schembri – a good friend of D'Angely and an ardent Jacobin, Salvatore Astor, Saverio Portughes a member of the west municipality, Vincenza Mallia, Francesca Fenech, Paulo Mallia President of the West municipality, the already mentioned Matteo Rizzo and Giuseppe Scolaro.⁴¹

The spononara which these ardent Republicans armed sailed out of Malta in February 1799. Captain Gaetano Cavassa was their ideal candidate. Cavassa⁴² was the son of Simeone another corsair captain. The family was originally from Genoa but had been living in Malta since at least 1765.⁴³ Gaetano had captained numerous Maltese corsair ships and in 1787 had fallen into slavery in Tunis.⁴⁴ During the blockade he became an active republican sea captain. The daring Cavassa had been evading blockading ships for months; his latest bravado had been entering into Grand Harbour laden with food for the besieged. His re-entry and subsequent celebrations inside Valletta had been the catalyst in destroying Xerri and Lorenzi's plan.

Cavassa's ship 'Le Republican' had 23 men aboard.⁴⁵ It was an enterprise which needed a good deal of old corsair tactics. She was only armed with heavy blunderbusses. As captain of the privateer the Captain made sure to buy a British ensign so as to confuse any potential hunter.⁴⁶ Not much has been discovered about Cavassa's cruise; nonetheless we know he was intrepid enough to make two captures. His first prize was captured only two days after he had left the safety of Grand Harbour. He returned with his prize and immediately returned to sea. On his second occasion he captured a small ship with a crew of 14 Maltese sailors. He took prisoner his fellow Maltese compatriots and tried to offload anything of value onto his spononara. However he had to abandon his prize as soon as English ships appeared on the horizon.⁴⁷ During his captures Cavassa impounded tobacco, olives and loose money.⁴⁸ His haul was not a lucrative one; Cavassa explicitly told his investors that he refused to continue as captain of the privateer. By March 1799 he had handed over the command of his ship to Captain Michele Cardona.

Captain Michele Cardona was a Neapolitan who had been living in Malta since 1782. He had served aboard various corsair ships and was Captain on a couple of occasion.⁴⁹ The surrogate Republican Captain took command of 'Le Republicane'. From what evidence exists Cardona had less success than his predecessor and during the month of April at one point was even believed to have been captured by a British ship, however this was a false rumour.⁵⁰ One of the highest paying investors in this privateer enterprise was Captain Giuseppe Scolaro, the excorsair who had smuggled D'Angely a year before out of Malta was an old friend of Cardona. Scolaro was a slave merchant as well as a corsair captain. He was probably one of the most prominent investors in corsair ventures of the 18th century.⁵¹ In 1795 Captain Scolaro had illegally captured an Armenian prize and the Order's Tribunal had forced him to repay and compensate his victim. The fines were so hefty that

37 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f111v.

38 Alain Blondy, L'Ordre de Malte au XVIIIe siècle. Des dernières splendeurs à la ruine (Paris, 2002). 499.

39 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 429. The 'Carthaginoise' was the former 40-gun frigate 'S.Caterina'.

40 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 758.

41 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f111v.

42 Cavassa was written in various ways including: Cavazza, Cavazzo, Gavassa, and Gavasso.

43 NLM, Libr18 Vol:I f21.

44 NAM, TA AO, File 21 Case 23.

45 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f147.

46 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f111v.

47 Carmel Testa, The French in Malta, Malta 1997, 583.

48 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f147.

49 Liam Gauci, Out at Sea with Captain Michele Cardona, in Treasures of Malta 66, Summer 2016 25-31.

50 NAV, R180, Gulliano Chiappe: f124.

51 Liam Gauci, In the name of the Prince: Maltese Corsairs 1760-98, Malta 2016, 57.





Scolaro could ill-afford to pay them and he was incarcerated. Captain Michele Cardona had tried to help him and even ceded prizes in favour of his imprisoned friend. During the blockade the two once again found themselves scraping out a living together.

Scolaro though seemed to have been quite the character. His involvement in the corso had acquired him numerous sea going friends, amongst them, Captain Michele Picasso and his wife Anna Maria Picasso. Her husband was one of the most active corsair captains of the 1790's arming a ship every year for the corso. Michele and Anna Maria had been married since 1783.⁵² In 1797 he was defeated in battle close to Zakynthos and barely escaped with his life. He was saved by a Republican French ship and eventually returned to Malta.⁵³ Back in Malta the couple's marriage did not seem a happy one. In a court case from 1798, when Malta had already fallen into French hands, Anna Maria Picasso was accused of being a notorious public prostitute and trouble maker and furthermore she was the mistress of Giuseppe Scolaro. According to the court proceedings both were similar in character.⁵⁴ A further spin on this relationship, happening within the besieged cities, is that Anna Maria was the sister of Captain Gaetano Cavassa, and she would eventually end up in Corsica with her husband Michele and Giuseppe Scolaro.

Two years after the start of hostilities in Malta, Vaubois surrendered to the English blockading fleet. To the indignation of the Maltese Congress and their leader Captain Alexander Ball, his besieged men were given full military honours and given safe passage to France. Along with them many Maltese Republicans had no choice but to leave their home and follow their former liberators. Many would end up in Corsica or on mainland France in the Bouches-du-Rhone region. Their faith now sealed as collaborators of liberators that never bore any fruit. Many had been caught up in feuds and treachery that eventually would ruin any chance of victory. In Corsica they were given a pittance for their trouble and some were put to work on building roads. When eventually Mikiel Anton Vassalli arrived in Corsica as a fellow émigré some of the Maltese were also put to work growing cotton.⁵⁵ The plan was to loosen

the tight grip the Royal navy held upon all French dominions. By producing raw materials at home Napoleon could lessen his dependence on imports. Vassalli was tasked with growing the much needed cotton. It was not an easy task for the many excorsairs, now exiled, whose previous lives had been carved out at sea. There were 83 seamen in Corsica, all refused to serve with the French Navy as many were scared of reprisals against them, if they were ever caught.⁵⁶ Exiled, scared and with no hope of returning to their old ways Giuseppe Scolaro, Angelo Calandri, Michele Cardona, and Michele Picasso were amongst the many corsairs whose lives had spun out of control during the Maltese blockade. In the list of émigrés one finds other corsairs whose prominence in the 2 year interlude was not as outstanding as the above mentioned. Louis La Porta was a Corsair Captain serving in Malta in 1796.⁵⁷ Giuseppe Di Natale was nephew to the executed captain Guglielmo Lorenzi; so well known were Di Natale's French ideals that when he tried to return to visit his parents in Malta he had to quickly leave as he was chased out as a traitor.⁵⁸

Much more research needs to be conducted about this small community and their impact on Malta both during the blockade and after. As it is sure that more intrigue and a better understanding of their plight will be uncovered. Eventually some of the Maltese community stayed on in Corsica and France, others like Vassalli and Dr. Nicholas Randon returned when Napoleon was eventually defeated at Waterloo in 1815. Randon had been on the list of Traitors to the Nation found in Bormla in the summer of 1798. He had served as a doctor during the Napoleonic wars, especially in the peninsular campaign. He returned to Malta to work at the Dispensary for the Poor. He died in 1837.⁵⁹ Only a year before Randon's death, the aged doctor would have surely read or heard about Giorgio Mitrovich's political strife against Great Britain. Giorgio was the nephew of the Republican Corsair Giacomo Mitrovich. In London Giorgio was publishing the book 'The cause of the people of Malta'. The book was a criticism of the disgusting way in which the Maltese were being denied political rights. Mitrovich gives us a frugal connection: to the Corsairs that once were, to the returning Jacobins, and to political liberty a cause that had once been so revered by Vassalli and his fellow Corsair émigrés'.

52 Isla Parish Records, Marriages, 10th April 1783.

53 NAV, Verballi Box, 1797 Picasso (Damaged).

54 Carmel Testa, *The French in Malta*, Malta 1997, 249.

55 David Agius Muscat u Olvin Vella, *Minn Fomm Vassalli*, Malta 2014, 23.

56 Ersilio Michel, "Refugiati Politici Maltesi in Corsica (1800-1873)", *Archivio Storico di Corsica*, XV, n. 2 (1939), 232-246.

57 NAV, Verballi, 1796 Laporta.

58 Ersilio Michel, "Refugiati Politici Maltesi in Corsica (1800-1873)", *Archivio Storico di Corsica*, XV, n. 2 (1939), 232-246.

59 Carmel Testa, *The French in Malta*, Malta 1997, 696.

