

LIFE AND WELLBEING HISTORY

Francesco Crispi - a turbulent Italian future prime minister expelled from Malta



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passport valid for three months to travel to the US, and instead headed for Malta, then an unwelcoming haven for Italian patriots seeking refuge from the more or less despotic *ancien régimes*. He arrived here on March 26, by the vessel *Orontes*.

In Malta, he gave free rein to his political activism, through his two pro-*Risorgimento* newspapers, *La Valigia*, and later *La Staffetta*, and by organising support for the Italian unification cause. Throughout his entire Malta stay, he laboured under dire financial difficulties, and lived mostly on charity, the sale of his books and his wife's earnings.

A humble Maltese benefactor from Tarxien offered him hospitality in his home. Today, two houses in Tarxien compete for the honour of having hosted Crispi during his 21-month Maltese exile. My father, a boy, remembered this benefactor, then an old beggar in Strada Reale, in tattered tail coat and top hat, which he studded with pins and needles to avoid cruel urchins constantly ramming it down over his eyes.

Crispi's Malta stay was to provide the background for one of the several major scandals that bedevilled his public and private life. His partner, Rosalia Montmasson, a laundress from Savoy

who he met in 1849, had followed him to Malta in May, and he married her in Floriana, where he was then living, on December 27, 1854, only three days before his forced expulsion from the island. The marriage certificate, transcribed in the St Publius parish church registers, deserves a study on its own. Padre Luigi Marchetti, a hyper priest whose zeal sometimes landed him in trouble, married the couple; Giorgio Tamajo, a leading patriot in his own right, and the lesser known Luigi Dario Depreti, witnessed.

From their meeting onwards, Rosalia maintained Crispi with her laundering and ironing, promoted his ambitions and contributed consistently to his political growth. She was the only woman in Garibaldi's original *Mille*. She returned alone to Malta in 1860 to urge the Italian exiles to join an imminent expedition to Sicily.

Leaving Malta and with a now-flourishing political career, Crispi grew resentful of her tired looks and embarrassed by her unglamorous origins, though even political divergencies took their toll: Crispi had switched from republican to monarchist - unpardonably for Rosalia. He started a new relationship with the very young and noble Lina Barbagallo, who he married in the utmost secrecy in 1878, aged 60, when he was minister for the interior.

News of this second bigamous marriage was leaked to the Neapolitan *Il Piccolo* and a huge national scandal erupted.

At first, Crispi denied everything, lying through his teeth: "I am not the guilty one, I am the persecuted one." Criminal prosecution for bigamy was started against the minister, but a complacent judiciary scandalously dismissed the charges - the Malta marriage to Montmasson was discovered to be flawed. The Queen all the same publicly refused to shake his hand. Rosalia died in 1904 in extreme poverty.

The archives in the Archbishop's Curia house a curious request dated September 1894, from the Roman ecclesiastical *vicariato*, asking for "a precise and secure answer" to the question whether Francesco Crispi had lawfully married in Malta Amalia (sic) Montmasson. Why

was the issue revived in Malta 16 years after the scandal of the bigamous marriage? And only a couple of months after Crispi resigned from his second term as prime minister?

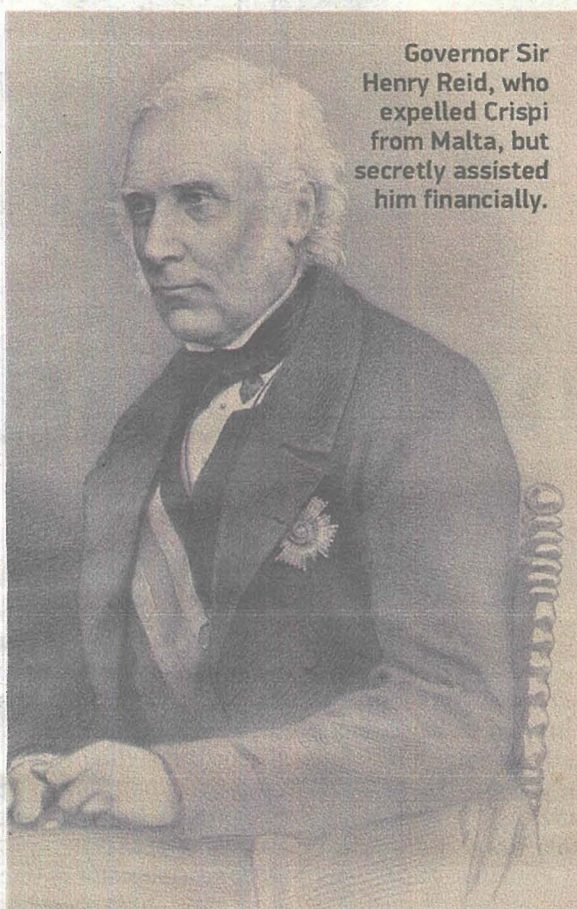
In the notarial archives may be found a very far-ranging power of attorney signed in Malta by Francesco Crispi, advocate from Ribera, Agrigento, Sicily, in favour of his father Tommaso, also from Ribera. Notary Giorgio Domenico Page drew up the *procura*, which mentions Crispi's mother, Giuseppina Genova, on June 22, 1853, witnessed by Robert Miller and V. Mamo. It may be telling that Crispi hired the services of Notary Page, founder and editor of the masonic and anti-clerical paper *The Malta Observer*, published just after Crispi left Malta. The Maltese accused Page of being an *agent provocateur* in the pay of the British authorities.

"Reid boasted that 'political refugees here understand they will not be allowed to make Malta a spot for hatching conspiracies against governments in friendly alliance with Great Britain'"

The National Archives in Rabat yield the richest harvest of documents that throw fresh light on Crispi's known expulsion from Malta by the British authorities. The saga starts with a long confidential letter by Governor Sir William Reid to the Duke of Newcastle, Minister of War and the Colonies, on December 20, 1854. He enclosed 14 numbers of *La Staffetta* edited by "a Sicilian refugee named Crespi Genova". This publication was in breach of a police order posted in 1849 by his predecessor Moore O'Ferral. Reid believed Crispi's writings tended "to stir up insurrection in Italy, to damage the cause we are fighting and particularly to vilify the French and their Emperor". He ordered Crispi to leave Malta



Rosalia (Rose) Montmasson, whom Francesco Crispi married in Malta on the eve of his expulsion.



Governor Sir Henry Reid, who expelled Crispi from Malta, but secretly assisted him financially.

within a fortnight. Reid added that other foreigners might need to be expelled, but so far, in three years, Crispi had been the second one he had targeted.

The first was the secretary to the Hungarian revolutionary hero Lajos Kossuth, Adriano Lemmi, later to become Grand Master of Italian Freemasonry.

Reid boasted that "the political refugees here understand that they will not be allowed to make Malta a spot for hatching conspiracies against governments in friendly alliance with Great Britain". The file contains a receipt by Crispi for one month's subscription to *La Staffetta*, paid by police inspector Vincenzo Caruana, as also the original office copy of the warrant for Crispi's expulsion from Malta signed by Governor Reid on December 18.

Fredrick Sedley, Superintendent of Police, informed the Chief Secretary to Government that Crispi had left Malta on December 30 by the steamer *Samson*, bound for England. From the War Office in London, the Duke of Newcastle reassured Reid on January 9, 1855: "I have to convey to you my approval for your conduct in this case." The same file reveals a gush of touching humanity -

Reid had personally slipped £5.0.0. to Crispi on leaving Malta "in order that he might not be entirely without money on landing". Newcastle ordered a refund of this sum.

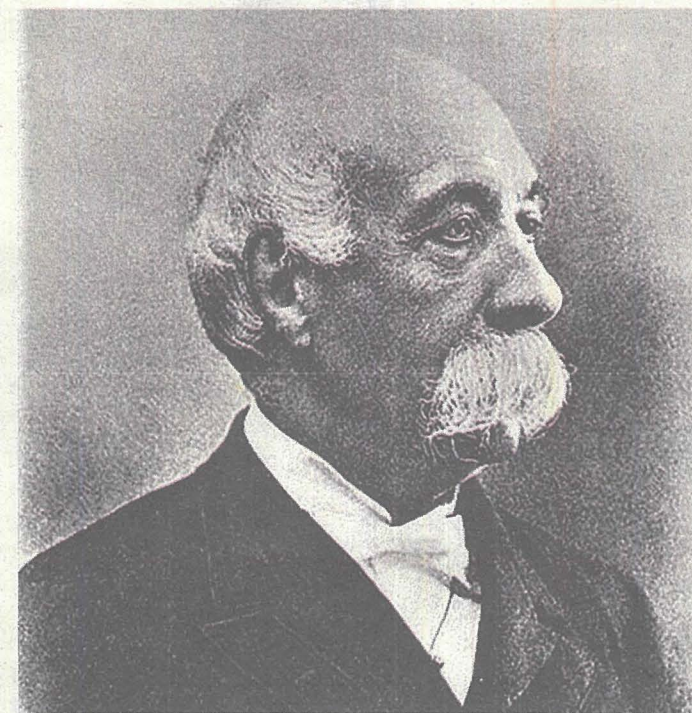
The prize find among these documents is a petition in Italian, addressed to Governor Reid, handwritten by Crispi just before his forced departure. In parts, it reads like a political manifesto of the Italian *Risorgimento*. It is clothed in sadness, fraught with defiance, draped in indignation. He kicks off with a rebuke to the governor: on service of the expulsion warrant, Crispi went personally to the Palace on a Thursday, the open day the governor saw anyone without prior appointment. Reid refused to receive him. Perhaps because he would feel embarrassed justifying an order that went against his inclinations? "I believe I am exercising a right as a free man, and complying with a duty as an Italian patriot, to leave in writing what I would have said verbally."

Crispi adds that the police had informed him he was being expelled because he had breached an order that prohibited foreigners from publishing anything in the press.

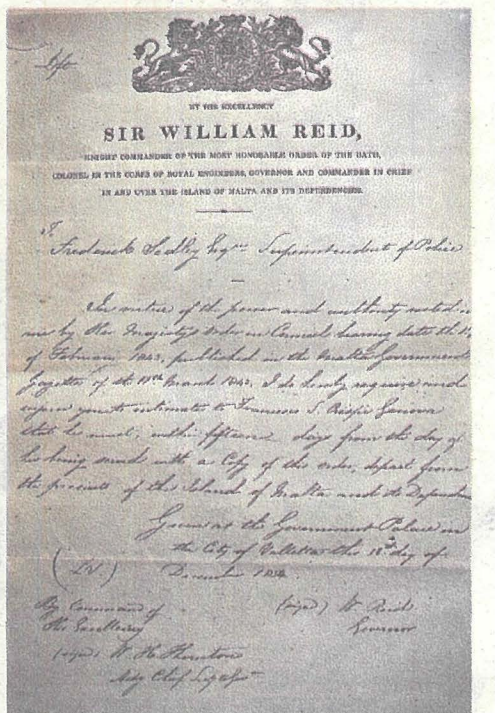
"Never would I have believed that under the rule of your government there would be a convenient exception that entirely contrasts with English practice." Hadn't the eccentric Baron Giuseppe Corvaja, supporter of the French, been allowed to publish newspapers and books in Malta, without punitive sanctions? A series of circumstances had led Crispi to believe he would not be singled out for punishment provided he kept himself within the limits of the 1839 Ordinance that established freedom of the press in Malta.

Henry Lushington, Secretary to Government, had informed him that only British subjects could publish newspapers in Malta, but that anyone was free to write in them. This he did. The police had subscribed to the *Staffetta*, and he signed the receipts because the owner of the newspaper had entrusted the administrative side to him. No one had ever warned him he could not write for the papers. There was no *dolo* (malice) - if there was *culpa* (negligence), this was with the indirect consent, even the complicity, of the police.

The Crown Advocate, Adriano Dingli, had perused line by line



Francesco Crispi, twice prime minister of post-unification Italy. Right: The 1854 warrant by the governor by which Francesco Crispi was expelled from Malta. COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES



the 96 issues of *La Staffetta*, in the hope of finding something to charge Crispi with, but in vain. Crispi asked whether the governor, or those who demanded his banishment, had ever read *La Staffetta* - wholly innocuous articles. Apart from the calumnies and falsehoods of some wretches sold to foreign anti-British powers "whom I hold in the utmost contempt", every honest person had agreed with Crispi's political tendencies, wholly in line with newspapers in the UK.

Crispi says he had been scrupulous in avoiding controversy on local matters, promoting only issues of general interest, and those values with which Anglo-Saxon governance had graced civilisation and achieved greatness. Being an exile from his native land, it was the independence and freedom of Italy that urged him to strive for the same conditions which are the right of other peoples. "These are the ideals that inspire this century and that independent minds in Great Britain continually proclaim to the admiration and applause of your compatriots. They are only opposed by despotic governments." It was natural, Crispi adds, that the representatives of those governments in Malta, to serve their masters, would urge his expulsion from the island and the closure of his paper.

He ended his *cri de cœur*: "You will realise in due time, Lord Governor, that signing the order against me, you have voluntarily gratified the hatred of the enemies of your country and of mine. I cannot but obey and suffer, but I have the right to proclaim this treatment unmerited and arbitrary."

But the more lasting result of Crispi's aversion for the Maltese



A commemorative tablet to Rosalia Montmasson in Florence.

Four years after his expulsion, Crispi re-entered the island clandestinely, using a forged passport. He was caught and turned back, though not prosecuted.

Crispi never forgot the hospitality and kindness he had received from the Maltese. My father Vincenzo recounted how a tavern-keeper near the Public Library, Masu Borg, daily offered Crispi a cup of coffee on the house. Many years later, after Crispi became prime minister, the tavern-keeper visited Rome, went unannounced to his office and asked to see Crispi. The security guards at the door turned him away, but Borg insisted in his garbled Italian - tell Crispi that it's Masu Borg from Malta here to greet him. They did and gaped when the prime minister came to the door to hug him emotionally and to invite him to dinner.

But the more lasting result of Crispi's affection for the Maltese

was his enactment of the *Legge Crispi* in 1889, by which Italy granted citizens of Malta (and other 'Italians' outside Italy) some of the rights enjoyed by native Italians. These benefits were later extended to include rights of Maltese for employment in the Italian public service, even hinted at in the post-war constitution. Thanks to Crispi, long before both countries joined the EU, the Maltese could live, study, work and trade in Italy as if they were Italians.

And Dom Mintoff relied heavily on the *Legge Crispi* in his top-secret negotiations for the integration of Malta with Italy in 1963, when George Borg Olivier was striving for independence.

Acknowledgements

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