

THE NAXXAR PARISH ARCHIVES: THE FRENCH CONNECTION

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A lot has been written about the two eventful years of the French occupation of the Maltese islands. Comparatively little, however, has come to light on life outside Valletta and the Three Cities where the actual fighting had taken place. Had normal life in the villages been interrupted? How did events in the cities influence the quiet life of the villagers?

To try to find answers to such questions one needs to go directly to parish archives where the records of the villagers can be found. The Naxxar archives are fortunately quite rich in such material. The parish priest kept the normal records he was bound to keep: baptisms, marriages, and death registers; the account books of the parish and of the numerous other chapels which provide an insight into all parochial activities. Moreover other important documents were kept which add to our knowledge of these two 'lost' years.

The most interesting of these documents are eight official letters exchanged between the French commission of government and the Naxxar municipality.¹ This correspondence covers the two months from the establishment of the municipalities to the outbreak of hostilities at Mdina.

The first document is a private letter written to a particular person. The second one has the official lettering at the top while the other six have a printed letterhead at the top, showing the official stamp of the Republic with the words *LIBERTÉ* and *EGALITÉ* on either side. The title *RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE* is written in bold and bigger script.

All letters are numbered on the back and they are also given a title. This must have been the work of the parish priest himself, Don Giorgio Fiteni, who did the same thing to all other documents in the parish archives. The letters are numbered as follows: 1. *Deputati della Municipalità*; 2. *Luca Sammut Controventore*; 4. *Sopra li*

¹ Parish Archive Naxxar, French Period Doc. 1.

Diritti; 9. *Ammonizioni*; 13. *Sopra li malviventi*; 17. *Sopra le licenze de Negozianti e bottegari*; 18. *Pastorale del Vescovo*; 20. *Sopra li pegni del Monte di Pietà*.

It is clear from the numbering that other letters have gone missing. It is also surprising that in the very short period of two months there was such a relatively brisk correspondence. Maybe things were happening at such a fast rate that the municipalities had continually to ask for advice. The writing of so many letters in such a short period may also have been a trick by the municipality to play for time and find excuses to the many requests coming from the central commission.

The first letter, dated 24 June 1798, is addressed to Citizen Falzon, the medical doctor in Mosta, appointing him member of the municipality which was to meet in the canton of Naxxar. It informed him of the other members forming the municipality. He was also informed to go to Valletta together with the other members to take the oath prescribed by law. One of the members is referred to by nickname: Tommaso *il chaddis* (the saint). The letter is signed by Bosredon Ransijat and by Ovide Doublet, president and secretary of the commission of government, as in fact are all the letters addressed to the municipality.

The second letter (number 2), dated 12 July, has the official wording at the top, but is all hand-written. The official papers had presumably not been printed yet. The commission approved the action taken by the municipality against the law-breaker Luca Sammut, but also informed the deputies that the municipality of Mdina had no jurisdiction over them. Apparently the Naxxar deputies considered the Mdina municipality as some superior authority.

The third letter (number 4) is dated 18 July and is the first with the official heading. It is in fact an extract from the register of deliberations of the commission of government in the sitting of the morning of 18 July. With the benefit of hindsight, in it one can spot the first signs of the coming storm. It ordered all dues gathered by the municipalities to be passed on to the treasurer at the end of each month. A register was to be kept of these entries.

The next letter (number 9) and is dated 1 August 1798. This letter, which was more of a rebuke, censored those deputies who were going beyond their duties. They were not to make any petitions signed by the president and the secretary; rather they had to pass on such petitions to the competent authority. Neither were they to sign petitions passed on to them by individual citizens.

In between this letter and the next one (number 13), there is another considerable

gap, this last one being dated August 14. However, there is another letter, not on official paper like the others. It is not numbered and is written on an A4 size paper folded in two, thus making four small pages. It is actually made up of three messages from the municipality to the commission. In the first message, dated 2 August, the municipality answers a number of previous orders.

First they said they were finding it very difficult to force the cotton merchants to spin the cotton they had. These had not yet sold the cotton already spun and they did not have the necessary cash for the other business. With regards to the sailors requested, the municipality had done everything possible but there were none to be found. Finally it pointed out that, in spite of several requests to the printer for writing paper, they had not received any reply. This could explain why the letter was written on different paper. The second letter is an appeal to give immediate protection to the farmers with regards to the cotton harvest.

The third part pointed out to the commission that the municipality had appointed citizen Ignazio Portelli as the *cattapano* or public weigher.² More importantly, it was asking to be provided with a chest of drawers, a big table, six chairs, two benches, a curtain, a candle-stand, an ink-stand, a stamp, and a crucifix. They also asked for furniture for the justice of the peace. This is very significant and also rather ironic. After almost six weeks they had no furniture to work on. Annexed to this letter is a note which lists the cotton merchants of the district with the amounts of cotton, Maltese or imported, in their possession.³ All three messages are signed by the secretary Gio Maria Borg and the president Andrea Micallef.

The next official letter (number 13) is dated August 14. The commission informed the municipality that some men of bad conduct were still creating trouble. They were to act against these with the necessary proofs before the justice of the peace.

2 In a very informative document, dated 1789-99, which lists all families by name, surname, and nickname, the parish priest refers to Ignatius Portelli, 39 years old, as *Magister* who lived in the parish house with his wife Gratia née Venetiano, 36 years, and his two children, Anna Maria, 5, and Joseph, 3. His nickname was, appropriately, *tal Kapillan* (of the parish priest).

3 This is a short note written on a half page. Each cotton merchant is listed by name, surname, nickname, and the amount of cotton in his possession, e.g. Michele Mifsud ta Calaci quint(ali) 5 circa maltesi. The first six are listed on one page, while on the other side there two *Nasciarini* and three *Gargurini*. (This is the first time I have met such nomenclature for the inhabitants of the two villages in the documentation.)

The next letter (number 17) is dated 17 August and was one of those which contributed directly to the revolt. It had been decreed that all licenses given by the knights were to be revoked which meant that whoever had a business outlet had to re-apply.

Another gap follows this letter, the next one being dated August 21 and is numbered 18. A copy of *Giornale di Malta*⁴ as well as a pastoral letter from Bishop Vincenzo Labini were enclosed with this letter. The pastoral letter was to be read in church in the presence of a member of the municipality. This letter also enumerated the various dues to be collected and passed on to the treasurer. These included those previously collected by the jurats of the *Università*; those which used to be collected by the *Corte Capitanale* of Mdina; the bread tax; new licenses; and renewals. The secretary of the municipality was to be paid 10 *scudi* out of these moneys, if he carried out his job well!

Another point raised in this letter was the pillaging that was going on. The municipality is reminded that it was its duty to solve this problem together with the justice of the peace. The members were told that they had enough soldiers at their disposal to keep order. The sergeant of the *Cacciatori Maltesi* had 12 muskets at his disposal! This force was considered enough to enforce order in practically one-third of the island.

The last letter (number 20) was probably the last item of correspondence between the commission and the municipality. Dated 28 August, five days before the actual revolt in Mdina, it is a brief note regarding the reorganization of the *Monte di Pietà*. A note informed the members that this proclamation was to be published as soon as possible. It was the beginning of the end!

Besides these letters, there is a communication which stated that all those citizens who objected going to the parish priest to register acts of civil status could do so at the municipality. This communication consisted of nine articles,⁵ spelling out exactly what was to be done in the event of a birth registration, a marriage contract, and death certification and burial.⁶ Article 7 stated that these registers were to be held in duplicate

⁴ Unfortunately the copy of the *Giornale di Malta* mentioned here is missing.

⁵ PAN, French period, Doc. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Article 5 states that burial was not to take place before 24 hours following death and this in the presence of two family friends and a member of the municipality.



RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

à la Cité de Malte le 27 Thermidor de l'an 6. de la République.

La Commission de Gouvernement des Isles de Malte et Gozo.

À la Municipalité del Cantone Naxxaro.

La Commission riceve in questo punto la tua lettera
 de' 27. corrente, e vi ravvisa che li Maltesi continuano ad
 inquietare ed arrubare i buoni Cittadini. Ricorrete al
 giudice di Pace, non con parole, ma con fatti, e colle dovute
 prove. Egli è nell'obbligo d'invigilare sulla di loro condotta,
 anzi di farli arrestare se occorre, e di aprirli su questo particolare
 un carteggio coll' accusatore pubblico. Onde, se lo rispettiamo,
 ricorrete al giudice di pace, ed avrete soddisfazione.

Salute e stima.

Il Preside della Com. ne

Benedetto Rafij

Il Segretario
 Doublet

Letter from the French Government Commission to the
 Naxxar Municipality, dated 14 August 1798

and the president of the municipality was to deposit a copy at the civil tribunal at the end of each year. At the bottom of page four it is signed by Commissioner Regnaud and dated 24 August. This communication is written in Italian only, unlike the letters which are in two languages.

Another longish communication, eight pages in all, addressed to the municipality lists all lands and other properties previously belonging to some foundation.⁷ These were to be taken away. Although the document itself is not dated, the parish priest, Don Giorgio Fiteni, declares at the end that he had read out this declaration on 26 August as he had been obliged to do.⁸

Another most useful document is a *Ragguaglia che danno li procuratori Del Nasciario al moderno governo di tutti le fondazioni, legati di messe, legati di montaggio, sussidi di poveri*.⁹ This is a complete list of all church possessions, fields, gardens, open land, foundations, legacies, and other possessions, whether these belonged directly to the church or to some chapel, altar, or confraternity. This is indeed an invaluable document for researchers of church history, as well as the social and economic history of the period.

Maybe Naxxar's most significant contribution during the two years of the siege of Valletta and the Three Cities was that the village accommodated large numbers of refugees from the harbour cities. That these were present in the village from the first months is evident from the parish registers. In the death register there are already entries for November 1798, just two months after the beginning of the revolt. Next to one of these entries, that of Gratia Vella, a child of 5 years from Floriana, the parish priest put down the note *quia tempore belli*, because it was time of war.¹⁰

7 PAN French period, Doc. 3. (The document lists lands and properties which had belonged to the Cotoner foundation, the Lascaris foundation, the Procura Anziana dell'Assemblea, the Procura Fernalda dell'Assemblea, the Pilar foundation, the Marradas foundation, the Paola foundation, and the Secretia Magistrale.

8 (The parish priest signed this document thus: *Io Giorgio Fiteni Parroco ha publicato a tenore la presente oggi li 26 Agosto 1798*.

9 PAN French period, Doc. 4, 30 pages.

10 PAN Liber Defunctorum III, 1762-1809, f. 479.

A unique document is the list of the refugees drawn up at Eastertide 1799. This document, very probably drawn up by the vice-parish priest, lists all families according to the city they came from. There were 283 families made up as follows: Valletta/Floriana, 420 persons; Cospicua, 259; Senglea, 154; and Vittoriosa, 53. In all there were 886 individuals living with 2,408 Naxxarin, in a total of 664 households. Among the more prominent people who had left the harbour cities to live in Naxxar, there were the brothers Paolo and Francesco Parisio, who came to live in the family country palace. There was also Count Aloisio Ciantar, son of the well-known Gian Antonio.¹¹ This list was very probably drawn up by the vice-parish priest who was not so conversant with some of the strange surnames he came up against. This explains the strange spelling of some, e.g. Camizuli (Camenzuli); Cingura (Cangura); Carbot (Carabott); Marcica (Mercieca); Stafragi (Stafrace); and Casaretto (Casalsetto).

Naxxar is also fortunate enough to have another complete list of the refugees still living in the village at Eastertide 1800. This time the list is drawn up by one of the refugees, Don Nicola Penun, a member of the Order of St John, who had been entrusted with the parish after the death of Fiteni during the epidemic of March-July 1799. Penun was very meticulous and noted down everything. The list of 1800 is marked as 'List of foreign persons who are living in this parish on the occasion of the revolt of the countryside against the French'. This list is on a separate document and not with the *Status Animarum* list.¹²

In the first two pages, Penun listed the priests, 10 in all and 2 novices. The priests included two brothers, Antonio and Lorenzo Biagio from Valletta, while among the novices of the Order there was a certain Alessandro Catania. Don Nicola listed the families according to the city they came from and also according to the house they were living in, following a street plan. This time the number of refugees had increased to 1,257. When it is remembered that the population of Naxxar at the time was 2,234, this meant that there was one refugee for every two Naxxarin.

11 PAN Status Animarum 1799, unpaginated, gives this information: Ciantar Aloisius, 58 years, son of Conte Gian Antonio and (Theo)dora, together with his wife Maria Theresa, 43 years, daughter of Saviour Vella and Rosa, as well as their children Saviour, 14 years, and Anna, 10 years. (They came from Valletta and were living in house no 525 in Castro street.

12 PAN Stato delle anime ossia Rollo delle Persone Estere delle 4 Citta abitanti in questa terra Nasciario.

I have studied these lists at some depth, comparing both lists of 1799 and 1800.¹³ Roughly only one-third of those who had been living in Naxxar in 1799 were still there a year later. This means that over 800 had arrived after mid-1799. This is proof of considerable movement among these refugees, certainly not back to their homes, but from village to village in the countryside.

Such a large number of residents living in houses which had previously accommodated a certain amount of people and now had to make do with half as much again, obviously created social and hygienic problems. These more than 1,200 refugees were accommodated in 209 different houses, an average of six persons per house. There were families living in every possible room, even in animal sheds at the back of the houses and in farm houses.¹⁴ A number of families were lucky enough to be accommodated in the Parisios' country palace.¹⁵

It is quite probable that this over-crowding created the ideal situation for the quick spread of the disease that struck in the early months of 1799. No less than 337 burials are registered between January and December 1799!¹⁶ Of these, 86 were people from the cities. The Naxxar-born were, ironically, the worst hit.

One would have expected this immigration of people from the harbour cities among the simple country folk would have brought about a substantial number of inter-marriages and other social effects. There were, however, only 11 mixed marriages. Six of these involved a Naxxar girl marrying an outsider.¹⁷ Three of these marriages

¹³ P. Catania, *In-Naxxar Titwiliet fl-Istorja* (Malta, 1999), 122-93. The two lists are printed in full, with all family details.

¹⁴ PAN Rollo delle Persone Estere, unpaginated, '*nella remissa*', '*nello detto Razzetto*'. In this mentioned *remissa* there are actually listed six families, in all 22 persons.

¹⁵ There were eleven families living in this palace, a total of 41 people.

¹⁶ PAN Liber Defunctorum. This number is five times as much as the number of deaths registered in 1797: 72.

¹⁷ Of these eleven marriages, three of the six Naxxar girls married a man from Cospicua, one from Floriana, one from Valletta, and one from Senglea. The other inter-marriages were between spouses from the cities themselves.

took place in 1799 and the other eight in 1800. Had the situation lasted longer there might have been more of these mixed marriages.¹⁸

The Naxxar people must have been attracted to such surnames as Gambetta, Vento, Murigia, Negroponte, Vitali, Calvani, Ros, Giappone, Parnis, and Lefevre, used as they were to such as Sammut, Borg, Grech, Cammilleri, and Agius. Some soon took advantage of the situation and they began to call on these people living in their homes to act as godparents to their new-born.

With the exception of the first three months, when orders from the French authorities were being issued every day, life in the village seems to have been only minimally disturbed. Going through various accounts registers in the archives it is clear that all religious festivities continued to take place, even the minor celebrations in the small chapels. All the feasts were held with the usual procession and pomp. Even the Good Friday procession was held uninterrupted during the two years.¹⁹ From the income accounts it is also clear that the refugees did not contribute at all financially. The same amounts were more or less collected during the two years as in previous ones. They had, after all, left their homes penniless!

It is not surprising therefore that as soon as hostilities ended and the French left the island, most of the refugees returned immediately to their home towns. No more references to them are to be found after March 1801.

¹⁸ It is of interest to point out that 150 years later a similar exodus took place from the cities to the country villages, including Naxxar. In the four years of the Second World War many were the mixed marriages.

¹⁹ PAN Introito Ed Esito Dei Dolori 1765-1809, Esito f. 85v. '*Piu scudi uno e tari sei per li sonatori della Processione*' [1799]; '*predica, sonatori, oglio per i vari, violincello*' [1800].