The history of Maltese lexicography is the history of a two-century old process of periodical attempts to record the linguistic heritage of these islands in some sort of order, alphabetical or other. I say “periodical attempts” because it is possible to trace three very distinct periods of activity in this field of Maltese studies, as a result of which several dictionaries have seen the light of day while some others have remained unpublished and unknown. It is with the latter that this article deals; but to appreciate more fully the attempts of the pioneering days of Maltese Literature I will also deal with the three phases of lexical studies in Malta against their historical background.

The first stage had its origin in 18th century Malta. Now this century saw the decline of the Order of St. John, but, together with the preceding century, it was also the period during which, more than ever before, the arts and the sciences flourished in these islands. Many paintings and sculptures in our churches, auberges, palaces etc., date from this time, which Isouard and Azzopardi, who made a name for themselves in the world of music, also belonged. Indeed, since the latter half of the 17th century a national awakening had been set afoot by the first Maltese historian, Commendatore Abela, who made his countrymen realise and appreciate their national heritage, a sense of national importance fostered by the ever-increasing part that Malta was playing in European politics, by the academic calm that followed the decline of Turkish power and by the number of manuscripts and early printed books available in private collections in Malta. This intellectual awakening later on resulted in an intelligent interest in our language. Indeed, following the discovery in the latter half of the 18th century of the famous cippi from the inscription of which the Phoenician alphabet was reconstructed by Abbé Barthélemy, the Maltese language came to be regarded as a “key to many locks”, as “by its aid could be studied more closely the local history and traditions of the islands” and as the Maltese scholar “with his Western culture and his knowledge of modern science and all it stood for, could bring a progressive mind to an analysis of Eastern problems, either of the remote past or the living present and communicate his discoveries to scholars on the continent in an effective and useful form”. As a result Maltese and Knights scholars vied with each other in producing Maltese grammars and dictionaries most of which, unfortunately, have been lost.

It was not an idle interest that the Knights took in the Maltese language. True, it was often an interest aroused mainly by curiosity, but it takes something more than mere curiosity to make a French Knight study, not only the Maltese words and idioms in common use, but also the dialectical variations and the nice differentiation in phonetics and intonation of the towns and villages of such a small island as Malta. This is what Frederick W. Ryan, from whose work The House of the Temple (London, 1930) we have already quoted, says of one of these savants: “Individual Knights studied the Maltese Language. One Knight, the Bailli de Neveu, was so proficient in his knowledge of Maltese that he was said to be able to tell at once, by the varying accents, the particular districts to which a native speaker belonged” (p.139). Moreover, the Knight Turgot thus wrote to De Soldanis from Paris on the 31st October, 1753: “Ho ceduto la grammatica (meaning the Lingua Punica published in Rome in 1750) al signor de Tournon, antico officiale delle navi nostri, uomo di merito ed adesso maritato, et molto perito della lingua maltese che si diletta di parlare trovandone l’occasione” (R.M.L. Ms. 146, Vol.III p.215). De Soldanis refers to this same Tournon as the author of a Maltese grammar which was never published. In his Lingua Punica (Rome, 1750, p.61) we read of Fra Monsignor
Vescovo d'Epifania Xeberras (who, according to De Soldanis, could speak fifteen different languages) che faticò molto per pubblicarne una grammatica per la lingua Punica Maltese, e conosce il Signor Tournon, allora Cavaliere di Malta, oggi abitante in Francia, che stando in Malta formone un'altra, ma ritrovandosi quest'oggi nella sua Patria, e l'altro passato a miglior vita, nulla s'è veduto'.

To the same Gozitan scholar we are indebted for other interesting information on the position of Maltese in the 18th century. We learn, for example, that both Maltese and foreigners in his time wrote Maltese either in Latin characters or in Latin and Arabic symbols. Among the latter he mentions a certain Rev. Giovanni Cachia, whom he described as a studioso et erudito sacerdote, perito della lingua Araba sia antica che moderna. Besides, there were many Knights who, anxious to learn Maltese properly, asked De Soldanis to publish a Grammar for the benefit of those Knights who came to Malta as Novices or to serve their term on the galleys, unable to understand the language of the people of Malta. Among those who encouraged Agius to publish his Lingua Punica we find the Knight Fra Luca D'Argens, Commissario della Sanità, the Knight Dgueast Junior, Commissario della Casa della Carità alla Floriana, the Knight Turgot, of Paris, the Knight Laberiére and the Knight Vittorio Belmont. But there were other members of the Order who found it very easy to learn Maltese per il solo desiderio di sapere parlare. These included the Ball Fra Antonio Escudero, Grand Prior of Navarre, the Ball Fra D. Francesco de Sousa, the Ball Fra Giacomo Francesco de Chambray, Commendatore Marieuf, the Knight Fra Paolo Antonio de Viguier, Fra Luigi Liberale Geoufre, Prior of the Holy Infirmary, and the Knight Remiking. Of the above, De Soldanis says: "tutti la parlavano, e i viventi la parlano con un intera pronuncia ed accento che un estero non li distingue da veri nazionali Maltesi" (p.63). Two other officials of the Order, to whom De Soldanis dedicated the first and second part respectively of his Lingua Punica, were also well-versed in the Maltese Language. The Gozitan Canon describes the Ball Fra Sestio Angelo Dericard, one of them, as a person che in Malta intendeva e dilettavasi di scrivere e parliare in tale favella. The other, Fra Don Giuseppe Almeida de Portugal, could speak several languages, among them the Maltese, in which he became more proficient on being appointed Falconier to Grand Master Pinto (p.68).

The close of the century saw the climax of this first wave of lexicographical enthusiasm which was also the most original. The revolutionary doctrine of national and human freedom which characterised this period was M.A. Vassalli's ultimate source of inspiration in compiling his Lexicon (Rome, 1796), of which the second part, etymological in nature, was never published and must be considered lost.

The second group of dictionary compilers belong to the middle of the 19th century. Three different types of persons stand out as representatives of this period of activity — Baron Vincenzo Azzopardi, who recorded the siege of 1798 and published two Maltese-Italian-English dictionaries between 1847 and 1856, Francis Vella, who published a Maltese grammar and a Maltese-Italian-English dictionary in Livorno, and G.B. Falzon, the compiler of a Maltese-Italian-English and of an Italian-English-Maltese dictionary, who kept a draper's shop at Senglea (1). Falzon published his first dictionary in 1845, two years after Vella's and two years before Azzopardi's dictionary.

Although these three gentlemen belong to different classes of society, they lived in the same age. This was the epoch which saw the uncertain quiet of the decades following the Napoleonic wars; it was the era of Metternich, of Congresses and of unholy "Holy Alliances" as well as of national enthusiasm and political consciousness throughout Europe.

(1) I am indebted for this information to Mr. Erin Serracino Inglott who heard it from a Mr. Xuereb lately residing at Kalkara.
A revolutionary spirit was at work, a spirit that led to the French Revolution of 1848, following which, "revolutions broke out from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and from France to the Russian frontier". Now all this had its repercussions in Malta as well. There were George Mitrovitch (1795-1885), Camillo Xiberras (1771-1855) and others clamouring for the political rights of the Maltese people. In 1839 the freedom of the Press, intoxicating men's minds with its potentialities, was announced and people hailed it as the herald of halcyon days to come. In the field of education, too, it was an era of reform. The two Commissioners, George Cornwall Lewis (1806-1883) and John Austin (1790-1859), reported amongst other things on the state of education in Malta and advised that on admission to a primary school a child was to be taught Maltese. To implement this, reading books had to be produced and, as a consequence, dictionaries were compiled as well. Various associations, such as the Società Medica d'Incoraggiamento (1840) and the Accademia Filologica with its organ Il-Malti (1843-1844) gave an added impulse to the study of Maltese, which was still further encouraged by the friendly attitude of Canon Pullicino, himself a President of the Accademia Filologica and one of a series of Maltese Directors of Education who contributed considerably towards the stabilisation of Maltese in the elementary school curriculum.

Such was the state of affairs in Malta when the men I have mentioned compiled their dictionaries and wordlists. They themselves expressed it in their prefaces. Indeed, writing from Leghorn in 1843 Vella thus addresses his fellow-countrymen: "Il desiderio da voi espresso d'introdurre la nostra lingua scritta nelle scuole del popolo mi suggerì il pensiero di compilare un vocabolario Maltese Italiano ed Inglese". Falzon echoes the same idea when he writes: "In un 'epoca qual'è la presente, nella quale la nostra lingua maltese, col beneficio della libertà della stampa, par che voglia uscire da quelle tenebre, fra le quali finor giacea sepolta, e godere di quella luce d'avanzamento di cui godono quelle di altre nazioni; quando si vede introdotta nelle scuole primarie di Malta quale mezzo per progredire all'italiano ed alla Inglese, quando molti valenti Maltesi, mossi dallo spirito di patriotismo, impiegano ogni loro studio per recarle sempre maggior lusso colle loro letterarie produzioni, sembra certamente al comun vantaggio necessaria la formazione di un dizionario maltese-italiano-inglese per cui i nostri nazionali possano con facilità e profitto dalla conoscenza della propria lingua fare rapido progresso a quella delle altre."

Of the other dictionaries belonging to this period we have already alluded to Baron Azzopardi's Piccolo Dizionario Maltese Italiano Inglese (pp.85), printed by S. G. Vassalli in 1856. This word-list is preceded by a list of the fifteen different alphabets used till then (2). There was also a Vocabolario Maltese Italiano Inglese which ran into four editions, the first of which in 1847, the second and third in March and May respectively of 1849 and the fourth in 1853. The two 1849 editions of this short dictionary were due to the fact that it was introduced into the Primary Schools, which left no copies available for those who wished to secure one. That this dictionary is also due to the same compiler appears from A. Schembri's "Selva di Autori e Traduttori Maltesi" (Malta, 1855, p.75) where we read that this work was written by Cav. Baron V. Azzopardi.

The thirty years of lexical sterility that followed this mid-century activity was broken in 1882, when the Xirka Xemja formulated its phonetic alphabet, used it in the publication of its organ Is-Settb (1884-1886) and introduced it, with the help of the then Director of Education, Sigismondo Savona, into the primary schools (3). It must

(2) Baron Vincenzo Azzopardi's name does not appear on this dictionary. Miss H. Castaldi, Assistant Librarian, has drawn my attention to a copy at the Library on which appear the words "del attention to a copy at the Library on which appear the words "del

(3) Vide S. Savona's "Circular to the Teachers" of the 14th November, 1882.
be remembered that this was a period of reform in Maltese education which, starting with the Commission of 1865, culminated in the publication of Keenan’s report in 1879, a report containing very encouraging comments and favourable suggestions on the improvement of Maltese as a language of instruction in the schools. Small wonder, therefore, that the Xirka Xemja’s alphabet found its way into S. Mamo’s English-Maltese dictionary (1885). But political pressure prevailed and there were no other activities in this field before 1900, when V. Busuttil, Inspector of Schools, published an English-Maltese and a Maltese-English dictionary, followed by A. E. Caruana’s Vocabolario della Lingua Maltese in 1903 and by Professor E. Magro’s English-Maltese incomplete (A to N) dictionary in 1906. The Government English-Maltese dictionary, which, starting in 1935, is still slowly coming out in parts, has now reached the letter G, with which Volume I ends. The work of compilation was originally entrusted to a Commission, but the work gradually devolved on Dun Karm, our national poet, who has brought the dictionary up to the letter R — far in advance of the printed parts. When completed, it will be a fitting end to the lexical aspect of half a century’s uninterrupted struggle to put Maltese in its rightful place — a struggle embittered by political animosities and by a false sense of national cultural direction (4).

So far I have briefly reviewed the main dictionaries which exist in printed form. But because no others were published it does not follow that no other dictionaries were compiled, or that other lexical works, which are now lost, did not exist in the past. Indeed, I intend to devote the remaining part of this article to the earliest lexical efforts in Malta, to enumerate the manuscript word-lists preserved, or which were once preserved, in the Malta Library or in private family collections, and thus provide a sort of guide to would-be research workers in this particular branch of Maltese Linguistics.

We come across the earliest mention of a Maltese dictionary in Mifsud’s Biblioteca Maltese (1764), in which this learned Maltese printed a letter, addressed to him by Pasquale Gilson, a Carmelite who was Maestro dei R.R. PP. Carmelitani e Consultore del Sant’Ufficio di Malta. This is what Gilson writes to Mifsud: “... mi prendo la libertà di trasmettervi un ms. che contiene la grammatica matese col suo dizionario Italiano e Maltese, composta da un Francese, ed ha il titolo che leggerete: “in Nomine Domini Nostri Jesu Christi, Amen. Grammatica Matelse composta da un Personaggio Francese”. This dry piece of information would have been meaningless had not Mifsud himself taken the trouble to insert a footnote informing us that the manuscript in question was written by a French Knight, Thezan by name. Indeed, according to Mifsud one could read at the end of the manuscript: “Fine della grammatica del Thezan, nobile, pio Cavaliere Francese”. Mifsud goes on to say that the work contained all the rules of Maltese grammar and that in the alphabet used there were ten (10) Arabic symbols to which the Latin letters were added for reasons of harmony and of easy pronunciation. The second part of this manuscript consisted of an incomplete Italian-Maltese word-list: “Siede il dizionario Italiano Maltese, commodo per i forestieri, non è completo, mancando in esso diverse parole”. This work, of which no traces exist, may be considered as lost.

The same writer tells us of another manuscript grammar with a Maltese-Italian-French dictionary compiled by Commandatore Fr. Francesco Bardon, who took great pains to turn out as complete a collection of words as possible, “procurò certamente di arricchire la raccolta a tutta perfezione e gli avrà costato non poca fatica”. To Mifsud we are also indebted for the information that this ms. was in the Public Library and that he himself had in his
possession another manuscript dictionary, presumably compiled in the 17th century by an unknown Maltese gentleman. This is what he writes: *Altro dizionario si conserva presso di noi anche mss., più perfetto e copiosissimo e per i nazionali molto commoda per essere Maltese-Italiano, compilato forse da qualche compatrioto, che non siamo giunti a sapere chi fosse, giacché sembra essere una compilazione fatta nel secolo passato*.

These notes by Mifsud induced me to go through the list of manuscripts preserved in the Royal Malta Library in the hope of tracing some one or other of these long-lost dictionaries. The closest scrutiny of the *Catalogo dei Codici e Manoscritti inediti che si conservano nella pubblica biblioteca di Malta* (1856) did not, however, land me anywhere near my goal and these dictionaries may be presumed to be now lost either because they were never bequeathed to the Public Library, or because the one by Bardon which was preserved there was mislaid when a considerable portion of our records were lost, as Chev. H. Scicluna says, “during their transit from one place to another at the time of the French Rule as well as during the British occupation of these islands, some of them have passed into private hands, others were probably taken by the Knights themselves before their departure from Malta” (5).

My search, however, was not wholly fruitless inasmuch as I came cross other manuscript remains of dictionaries, half completed or unpublished, on which I now give some notes.

*(To be continued)*

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