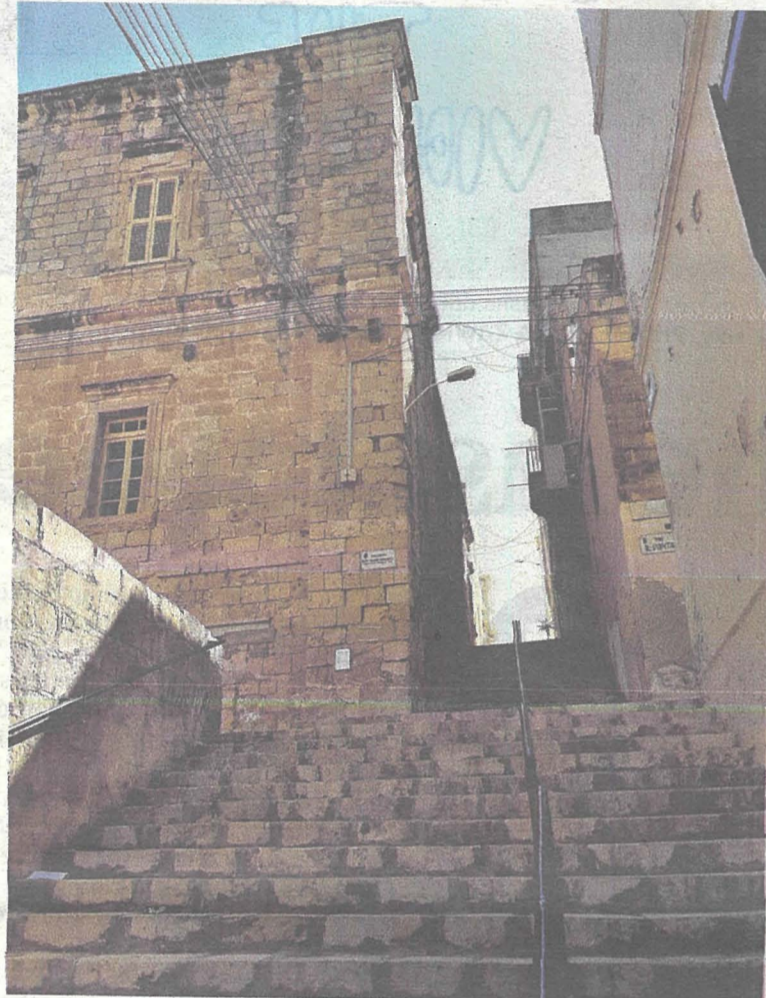
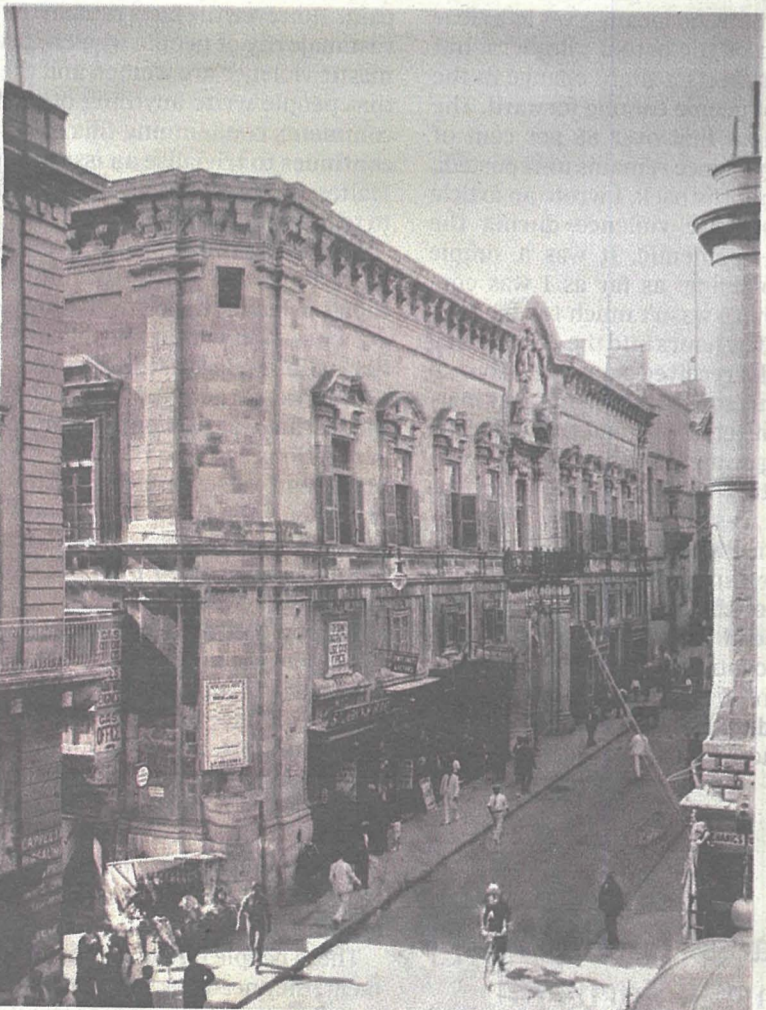


The 1832 beheading of a young woman in Senglea



The St Philip Street area in Senglea where Grazia Grech was murdered in 1832.



The Castellania, the old courthouse in Valletta, where Fedele and Laus were tried for the homicide of Grazia Grech and condemned to death.

GIOVANNI BONELLO



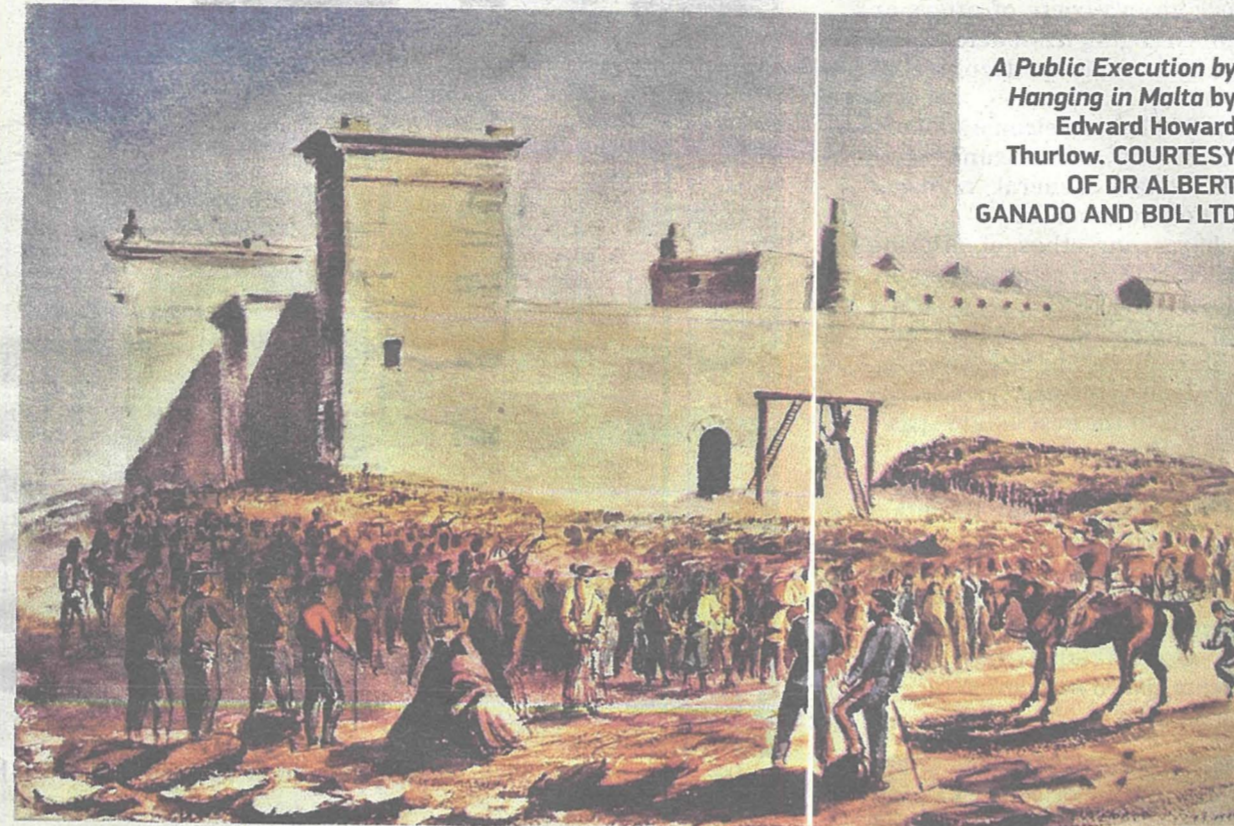
A macabre scene chilled the neighbours and the police when, on the morning of April 13, 1832, they broke down the door of the rooms where Grazia Grech lived and worked, in no. 37, St Philip Street, Senglea (renumbered 38 in 1930). They recoiled in horror at the body of a young woman, her head hanging only by the vertebra and some tattered skin and muscle from the neck, a razor with clumps of hair sticking to it and everything around soaked in blood.

The broad outlines of this gruesome murder are not unknown, but I came across a manuscript entitled *Capital judgement of Giovanni Fedele and Paolo Laus and its execution*, which throws plenty of new light on the events. This is included in a large collection of scrapbooks handwritten in Italian (nos 114 and 115 in the series) in private hands, put together by the Reverend Giuseppe Carmelo Gristi shortly after the crime. It contains the court's judgment and additional details and comments, but is copied, almost word for word from the Italian version of the *Malta Government Gazette* of May 23, 1832.

The main actors: two young men of whom we know the ages, and a girl, always described as *la sventurata ragazza* (not *donna*). The 18-year-old Giovanni Fedele hailed from Sliema, and Paolo Laus, three years older, from Valletta. They were inseparable and, though on paper apprenticed to a goldsmith to learn the trade, they lived a restless, vagabond life. The girl, Grech, known by her nickname *ta' Zolinzol*, earned her living in the sex trade. Malta, then one of the poorest countries in Europe, had an excess of women forced to rely on prostitution for a living.

The young men shared her graces jointly, and she virtually kept them and provided for them, to the point that she was known to sell her clothes to maintain them. She repeated to them they were her 'favourite' clients. They had frequented her rooms in a *kerrejja* in Senglea on a regular basis for about a year, by day and by night.

After dark on April 12, the two youths entered Grech's rooms,



A Public Execution by Hanging in Malta by Edward Howard Thurlow. COURTESY OF DR ALBERT GANADO AND BDL LTD

and at about 8.30pm, left to buy from a shop nearby some bread and *gbejniet*, together with a bottle of rum. This was remarkable, as they had only bought wine before. During the subsequent trial, the prosecution relied on this unusual purchase as another argument for premeditation: the killers needed Dutch courage and wanted to numb the victim. Fedele and Laus took the food to the girl's rooms, and left early the following morning, locking her door behind them.

During the night, the neighbours heard the two youths talking, but never Grech's voice, from which they deduced she had fallen asleep early. No one discerned any noises indicating a fight or an argument. At about 5am, one of the neighbours heard from the courtyard a loud gurgling noise, which the doctors later explained as the sound expected of air suddenly released from the lungs through a huge bleeding wound.

Shortly later, the neighbour noticed Laus opening the door of Grech's room to leave, but when he saw the witness, he immediately retreated inside, locking the door again. The neighbour then went out of sight, and Laus and Fedele re-emerged, and he heard them saying "*eija, eija malajr ghaggel*". Another witness saw them shortly later, Fedele telling Laus who had a key in his hand and was crying "*imxi, imxi, tibzax*".

All this raised the neighbours' suspicion. They called Grech but

received no reply. Some brought ladders and looked inside through a window. What they saw horrified them. They sent for the police who forced an entry into her rooms. The officers informed the duty magistrate of their gruesome findings. To assist him, Dr Salvatore Cecy appointed Dr Luigi Gravagna, a surgeon and later president of the Board of Health, and Dr Gavino Patrizio Portelli, a professor of anatomy and surgery at the University, and at 11am held an on-site enquiry (*access*). They found the body on the floor, wearing a shirt, and partly covered by a blanket and a bedspread. The body showed no signs of a struggle, and apart from the lethal wound, only had a small scratch on a fingertip. They noted the pillow and the under-sheet soaked in abundant blood.

The police established that the razor found near the body had been seen a few days previously in the hands of Laus, and another witness swore he knew both suspects made use of it. The sleuths also recorded that Laus's brother had a twin razor, identical to the murder weapon. When this blade, still clogged with blood and with plenty of hair adhering to it, was shown in court during the trial, it "produced a *brivido d'orrore* in all who saw it".

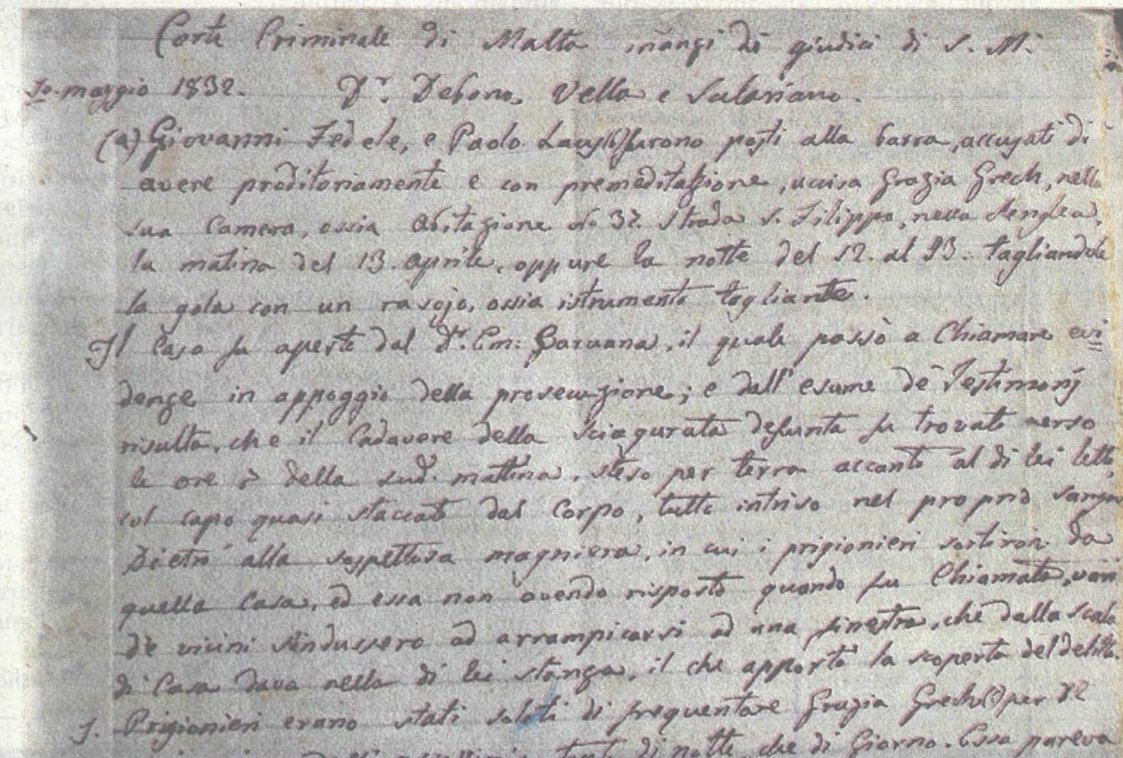
Laus and Fedele first roamed round the Senglea bastions, then left through Cospicua and walked all the way to Marsaxlokk. On their way there, various witnesses observed how their clothes were

soaked in blood, though Fedele was now wearing them inside out. When later asked about their bloodied appearance, they first said they had been attacked by thieves, beaten and robbed. Fedele then switched to a different excuse - leaving home he had banged into the open door and had suffered a copious nosebleed which had stained his clothes. Laus claimed he got his hands and clothes dirty helping his friend.

In Marsaxlokk, they boarded a boat and asked to be taken to St George's (probably Kalafrana, not St Julian's). The boatman, seeing them all splattered in blood, grew suspicious and ordered them off his craft. By now "confused and not knowing what to do", they walked all the way to Valletta and took refuge in the house of Gustu Sant, next door to where Laus lived, hid in the basement and changed their clothes.

Asked why they were hiding, they answered: "It's some time we wanted to do this." Meanwhile, news of the murder had reached Valletta and Sant bid them to leave his home. They went next door where Laus lived and where the police found and arrested them, also discovering their blood-soiled clothes hidden behind the garbage in the Laus home.

Their trial was held very shortly afterwards, on May 10, in the criminal court of the old Castellania in Merchants Street, Valletta. The accused stood charged with having *proditoriamente e con premeditazione* (with treachery and



The opening paragraph of the manuscript which describes in detail the murder, the trial and the execution of the accused. PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION

premeditation) caused the death of Grazia Grech. The court, composed of His Majesty's judges, Dr Giuseppe Calcedonio Debono presiding, flanked by Judges Dr Giovanni Vella and Dr Gio Batta Satariano, had an open and shut case. The president, born in 1756 under Grand Master Pinto, graduated in 1778. The British sovereign made him Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George the very year of the trial, and he died in 1837. The youngest of the trio, Judge Satariano, had only graduated 11 years earlier and died in 1857.

"They discovered she had gifted their ring to another 'client', and jealousy captured their spirit - they swore vengeance"

Strangely, no contemporary document mentions any defence counsel, which makes it likely the accused were assisted by the Advocate for the Poor, who from 1825 was Dr Filippo Torregiani (graduated 1794), assisted by Dr Luigi Bardon (graduated 1807, later magistrate in Gozo).

An extraordinary turnout of people crammed the courtroom. The public prosecution fell on Dr Emanuele Caruana, one of the founding fathers of

the patriotic movement in Malta, author of early tracts on political freedoms for the Maltese, now sadly forgotten and asking for commemoration. He had graduated Doctor of Laws in 1819 and rose to become director of public prosecutions.

The thrust of the evidence was to prove intent and premeditation. Various witnesses testified that the design to kill Grech had matured well before the culprits carried it out. Both the accused had been seen with the killer razor some time before the murder and they had openly boasted: "There will be great rejoicings, a feast that will see multitudes from Grazia's home all the way to Senglea Point." The witnesses only understood this hidden message after the assassination.

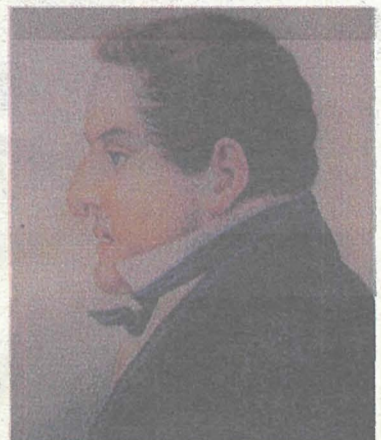
The evidence did not establish who of the two had actually slit Grech's throat. But a statement by the convicts after the trial revealed that Fedele had used the razor on her neck, while Laus blocked her mouth with one hand and with the other held the table knife with which the three had dined, ready to use should his friend have failed to put an end to the victim's life. With the prosecution's evidence wholly unassailable, a verdict of guilty became inevitable. The judges passed a sentence of death by hanging in a hall crammed to capacity with crowds that had been present throughout the whole trial.

A petition to Governor Sir Patrick Ponsoby to commute

the death penalty stood little chance of success - the femicide had been so cold-blooded, so gory, so long premeditated. "Had there been the slightest doubt about their guilt, their young age and a common sense of humanity, not less the standards of clemency with which our laws are applied, would certainly have worked in their favour; but this clemency could not extend to a killing so atrocious in nature."

A comment in the manuscript adds "they were dragged to their untimely death by a build-up of vices, and for long they had lived a dissolute life, having abandoned their families, by day and by night for several months". Some good news follows: before their execution, they repented: "They met their death with a perfect trust in the blessings of faith, making a full confession, acknowledging the justice of the sentence passed upon them."

The driving motive of this crime, which had remained obscure throughout the trial, they now revealed to have been jealousy. During their apprenticeship with a goldsmith, Laus and Fedele had fashioned a gold ring for Grech. They then discovered that she had gifted their ring to another 'client', a fishmonger, and jealousy captured their spirit - they swore vengeance. They had no problem at all with Grech giving away her body for money, but when she did it for love, she signed her death warrant. The ethics of it all remain



Governor Sir Patrick Ponsoby, who refused to commute the death penalty of Fedele and Laus.

rather inscrutable. Grech's elimination became their obsession, but every other previous occasion had somehow failed them.

The execution of Fedele and Laus took place a few days later, on Monday, May 21, on the Floriana glacis, roughly where the War Memorial now stands, facing Senglea, the scene of the crime.

Again, huge crowds gathered, eager not to miss the exhilarating spectacle of two young men writhing in agony, an advert for retributive justice. Unchallenged master of ceremonies was Michele Prestigiacomo, known as *il-Kalabriz*, a hard-working, obliging executioner who notched 40 hangings to his credit before retiring. Society then still dispensed capital punishments in the open and with the utmost publicity - a free show funded by the taxpayer, part entertainment, part therapy and part didactic.

The record adds that Fedele and Laus, accompanied by Capuchin friars, died highly repentant, begging the Saviour compassion and forgiveness.

Giovanni Fedele claims the dubious record of being the youngest person executed in Malta during the British period, and Grazia Grech the first prostitute to be murdered. But this crime of passion was not satisfied with the extinction of three lives - it claimed two other victims. Girolamo Laus, Paolo's father, oppressed by grief, humbled by shame, harassed by guilt, took himself to St Julian's on June 14, and there hanged himself from a tree. And the Lothario fishmonger, shortly later assaulted by persons unknown, is said to have succumbed to his injuries.

Acknowledgements

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