

MALTESE INTERNEES

(1940-1945)

Postal History

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D., K.M.

Of the many wounds the Second World War imprinted on the history of Malta, few can compare with the mean imprisonment and exile by the Imperial authorities of 41 British subjects. The colonial power, which had consistently striven to identify with the principles of the rule of law, experienced but little embarrassment in pulling down its mask, imprisoning the cream of the nationalist movement without charge or trial, and deporting its perceived leaders to Africa, in brazen defiance of its own laws.

Trouble had been brewing for a long time. This century, and up to the Second World War, the pro-colonial party, led by Sir Gerald Strickland, had only once swung a popular majority, for a short interval between 1927 and 1930. Otherwise, the various wings of the nationalist movement had dominated the political scene. Constitutionally these aimed at the amplest form of self-government as a necessary prerequisite for the advance towards full dominion status. This disrupted the plans of empire and military strategy, in which the fortress of Malta represented a vital hub. Improving the political liberties of the Maltese, observed an English statesman, was like granting self-government to a battleship.

What could have been straightforward constitutional issues entangled themselves by the phenomenon of *italianità*. Maltese culture had, for centuries, gravitated towards Italy — Italian was the written language and the medium of culture. Apart from the geographical vicinity, Sicily and Malta had shared a long historical heritage in law, religion, art, literature, folklore, crafts and political destinies.

The colonial power realised that the process of total absorption of Malta into the British orbit would never succeed if the Maltese stood by their proud 'latin' heritage. They would always resist the process of anglicisation of these Islands, so long as they identified with another major culture. Hence the necessity of breaking down the 'latin' substream of the national intelligentsia through a process spearheaded by a determined and systematic assault on the Italian language.

The nationalist leaders understood that, losing Malta's latin soul, and

diluting our spiritual identity, we would fall easy prey to the British scheme of colonial dominance. Cultural cleansing is slower, but almost as effective as ethnic cleansing.

Although the Maltese nationalist movement, up to the beginning of the Second World War, rallied to the cry of *italianità* there was little, if any, sympathy for the political unification of Malta with Italy. The Italian government, grateful for Britain's determining support for the liberation and unification of Italy during the *Risorgimento*, never faltered in promoting Anglo-Italian friendship and cooperation. It had no interest in endangering that excellent relationship by sponsoring any Italian crusade for the annexation of Malta, or any Maltese craving for merger with Italy.

The assumption of power by the Fascists in 1921, however, led, in time, to a profound disturbance in the traditional Anglo-Italian equilibrium; it also introduced an unknown quantum into the Maltese equation. Some of the old supporters of cultural *italianità* started viewing with increasing sympathy the resurgence of Italian pride and power. Italian propaganda now beamed its resources on Malta unblushingly.

The pre-war years saw the nationalist leadership shared by Sir Ugo Mifsud and Dr Enrico Mizzi. The former, an urbane statesman equally exposed to British and Italian cultural influences, represented the 'moderates'. Enrico Mizzi, less prone to compromise, doggedly stood by self-rule and *italianità*, even when it became obvious that the daunting watchdog of imperial interests in Malta was not amused.

The Strickland opposition — the Constitutionals — from pre-war times orchestrated a hysterical onslaught on the nationalist leadership, branding them with disloyalty, sedition, fascism and secret conspiracy for the overthrow of British sovereignty and for the annexation of Malta to Italy. Tempers flared high, with the Constitutionals cashing in on the protection, favours and advancement which the colonial power, naturally and willingly, accorded them.

The British authorities would have lived, perhaps grudgingly and uncomfortably, with the nationalists, in uneasy co-existence. But the local Constitutionals wanted more than that. They egged and incited the British overlord to clean the decks of all those who were not devoutly pro-colonial.

It is against this background that the saga of the Maltese internees stands to be examined. When war broke out in 1939 between Germany and the Allied powers, Mussolini at first dithered, sparing the Mediterranean the din

of battle. But when the Duce's slide towards the Fuhrer's centre of gravity became uncontrollable, Malta acquired a pivotal strategic importance. Its internal security won top priority.

This was the moment the Constitutionalists had been craving for so long. They prevailed on the British security forces by tenacious media perseverance and backroom political coercion, to round up and imprison all those political adversaries whom, they perceived, would pose an internal 'Italian' threat in the forthcoming hostilities with our fascist neighbour. Some 120 were arrested in various waves between May and June 1940. Italy declared war on the night between June 10 and 11.



Letter from an internee, postmarked Cospicua May 6, 1940, a day after the prisoner's arrest. Beart INT-1 in red and CS-INT-1 in blue, initialed by the

Those arrested included Dr Enrico Mizzi, co-leader of the Nationalist Party, the Chief Justice, Sir Arturo Mercieca, Dr Herbert Ganado, editor of the Catholic Action weekly, Dr Giulio Cortis Professor of Law, Monsignor Albert Pantalleresco, and my father, the founder and former director of the National Museum of Fine Arts. The security net also caught in its meshes many of



Above: A caricature depicting the Maltese internees behind barbed wire defying the British lion, by Paolo Consiglio. Published in Rome during the war

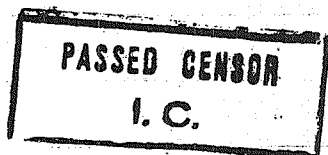
Below: Part of a letter by an internee, certified censored by CS-INY-1 in violet

humbler extraction; dockyard workers, artisans, small traders. All guilty of believing strongly in what their adversaries feared and loathed.

The political prisoners were first kept in Fort S. Salvatore overlooking the crucial naval dockyard in the Grand Harbour. The British military spared no effort in broadcasting the location of their detention. S. Salvatore was no accidental choice. It housed a major fuel depot, and any blitz by the Italian air force on the dockyard would automatically put the lives of the 'pro-Italians' in instant jeopardy.

mettiti d'accordo con miei;
dovrà cioè pagar caro
la visita di un fratello.
abbracci e baci a tou-
nellate!

Censuro



They were used, deliberately and maliciously, as human shields in a move to ward off attacks from the dockyard and the fuel depot.

The internees remained sheltering the dockyard with their persons up to July 7, 1940, when the fort was hit during an air raid and they had to be moved elsewhere. The security services could think of no better place for the Chief Justice and his companions than the criminal prisons in Corradino, Paola. Considering that not one of them had been convicted of any crime, or was then awaiting trial charged with any offence, the internees protested indignantly, and successfully. On July 20 they were again moved, this time to S. Agatha Convent, in Rabat.

Meanwhile the Strickland press, which had first campaigned for the internment of the nationalists, started clamouring for their deportation from Malta. And surely enough, on January 3, 1942, an 'Area Order' was issued to inform the internees of their impending deportation.

They instantly impugned the Order in court, and, on February 7, the First Hall of the Civil Court ruled that the Malta Defence Regulations of 1939 did not empower the Governor to deport British subjects.

This judgement did not deter the authorities. The Council of Government instantly convened to pass new legislation granting emergency powers for the removal from Malta of detained persons. Sir Ugo Mifsud, the other co-leader of the Nationalist Party, rose to deliver a masterful and impassioned speech on British constitutional order, continually obstructed by derisive interruptions from the Strickland members. Half way through he suffered a massive heart attack, and died two days later.

The Council approved the emergency legislation, and the internees instituted a second court case to challenge the new law. This time the Civil Court found for the government. They appealed. While these legal proceedings were still in progress, on February 13, 41 of the internees were herded into the hold of HMS *Breconshire* and transported to Alexandria in Egypt, their naval convoy suffering overwhelming losses at sea.

It must have been little comfort for them that, on May 4, the Court of Appeal confirmed the illegality of their deportation. The Judges had not even been informed that the deportation order had been carried out by the Governor, notwithstanding that its lawfulness was then being questioned in court. The Governor, General Sir Walter Dobbied, resigned forthwith; many believe in response to this court certification of the miscarriage of justice which he had been instrumental. Finding the underdog right and the British Empire

Egitto, 22 maggio 1942.

Mia mia carissima,

Se ti è presentata l'occasione tu mi devi recuperare delle carte che avevo imprestate al povero Alberto Stron. Si tratta di questo: quel l'ottimo amico mio preparava un dotto lavoro sul Dragut che doveva pubblicare insieme ad un altro studio nella Marina del l'Ordine di Malta; il lavoro è pressoché ultimato; so che lo dattilografavo quando lo lavoro intermesso; per questo lavoro io gli avevo imprestate parecchie schede mie

Vallore che a guerra finita mi occuperò io della pubblicazione; sarà un tributo doveroso da parte mia alla memoria dell'amico e dello studioso; che pertanto non dispendio le sue carte, fra le quali vi si potranno trovare più tardi, ~~essa~~, anche le schede mie

Letter by an internee from Egypt, heavily scissored by the censor



Governor Lt. Gen. Sir Walter Dobbie who deported 43 Maltese nationals to Uganda on his personal responsibility. He resigned from the Governorship of Malta and from the Army when Malta's Supreme Court declared that he was not empowered to carry out deportation (The King's Guests in Uganda by Edgar Soler)

wrong in the thick of the enemy blitz was an act of suicidal fearlessness on the part of the Maltese courts. Ironically, that judgement was delivered by the new Chief Justice, Sir George Borg, a former leader of the Strickland Party.

Most of the exiles remained three years in British concentration camps in Central Africa. First in Bombo, Uganda, and then in Soroti, a place listed as "unsafe for Europeans". Malaria took its toll of most of them. After various protests about the inhuman conditions of the Soroti concentration camp, a new site was found. They arrived at Entebbe on April 14, 1943.



Internment Camp N.7.
Soroti, 13th October, 1942.

To
His Excellency the Governor.
Entebbe.
Uganda.

Your Excellency,

We, Maltese Civil Detainees transferred from Malta to Uganda, have the honour to submit the following for Your Excellency's earnest consideration.

We, Maltese Detainees, have been now permanently attached to Internment Camp No.7, at Soroti, which is, with the exception of our group, entirely composed of aliens, mainly interned in the Middle East. As regards the treatment meted out to us in this camp we have found it to be fundamentally different from that meted out to the British and the Americans.

We beg to request Your Excellency to refer the above to the Rt Hon. the Secretary of State for the Colonies and to His Excellency the Governor of Malta, respectively.

We have the honour to be,
Your Excellency's
Most obedient servants,

Edgardo Jato
Jo. C. Audi
Salvatore Lauda
M. M. M.
J. M. M.
J. Cortis
Alb. B. B.
S. N. S.

Enrico M. M.
J. Sammut
S. S.
P. Casabene
M. M. M.
H. G. G.
P. S. S.
J. J. J.

A petition signed by many of the deportees, addressed to the British Governor of Uganda from the Soroti Internment Camp (cont. on next page)

Francesco Bunnin
Cezio Landi
Gul. Farnuzzi
A. G. B.
Ed. La Ferla

Giuseppe Ocichura
P. P. P.

Vincenzo Bionello
G. Felice
Giuseppe Landi
Umberto Pirroni S.

Mancini
W. Romano
Latre
dnc

The nationalist exiles were eventually repatriated in two batches, the first 18 in April 1944. The remainder arrived back to their homes and families on March 8, 1945. Dr Enrico Mizzi, the indomitable leader, experienced the sweet taste of vindication when he was elected Prime Minister of Malta in 1950, a few months before his death in office and the most grandiose funeral in local history.

A lot has been written about the internee saga (see sources below). An assessment which says it all comes from an unimpeccable authority. Stewart Perowne, a historian, and Englishman and a true son of empire has this to confess:

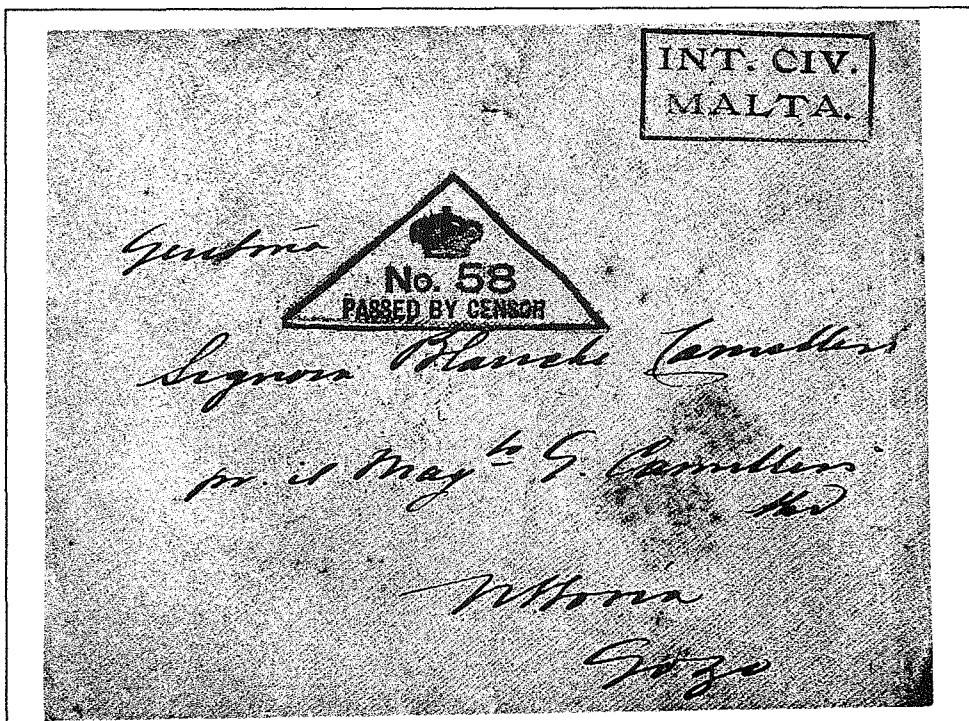
"It is a sad story, especially in retrospect. No charge was ever brought against them. They were victims... They were honest men with the courage of their convictions, and it was these convictions which convicted them. Looking back on this sorry, shabby affair, one can only find comfort in three things: that those affected were so few — about eighty, my friend says; secondly that they were treated so courteously, and thirdly, that so many of them survive to be admired citizens and ornaments of the international society of contemporary Malta" (*The Sieve within the Walls*, London, 1970, p.45).

Censura censurando,

15 Aprile 1942

Attendo ancora una tua lettera. Dal dodici Marzo scorso non so più ciò che è accaduto di te. Come ti ho già detto io scrivo regolarmente ogni settimana, però non so se l'indirizzo è giusto, e se te l'hai ancora ricevuto.

Questa volta ti devo parlare di disastri, però noi fino ad oggi grazie a Dio siamo stati risparmiati. Non così posso dire del resto della mia famiglia. La casa di mamma in [redacted] ha sofferto dei danni, ma minimi. Una scheggia ha forato il soffitto della sala da pranzo, e delle porte e finestre sconquassate. La casa della [redacted] invece ha subito danni maggiori. La parte poste



A letter from an internee in Malta, bearing the INT-2 rectangular cachet in red and the triangular CS-T2 N° 59 in violet

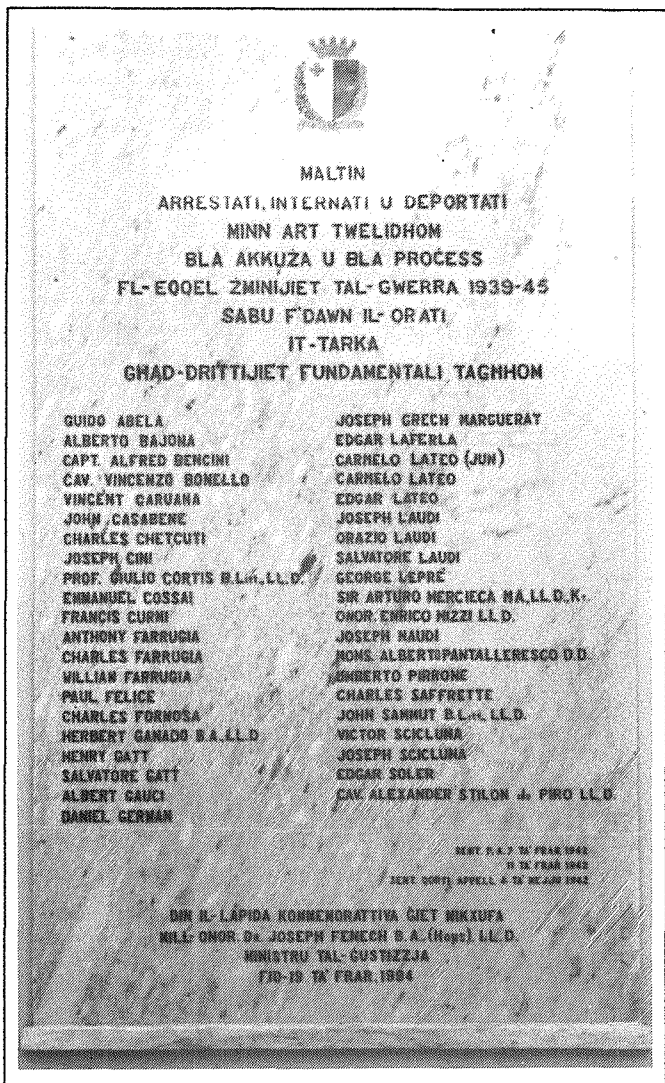
It was the first, and only, time in modern years, that persons had been deprived of their liberty without any charge having ever been laid against them, and without ever having been found guilty of any misdemeanour by due judicial process. This great affront to the rule of law and to basic human rights has been commemorated by a marble inscription in the edifice of the Law Courts in Valletta, unveiled during a moving ceremony on February 19, 1994. That we may forgive but never forget.

Special measures were taken by the authorities to regulate the mail of the internees when in Malta, and later of the deportees in Africa. Their quota could not exceed two letters per week, up to 30 words each, or four postcards, with a maximum of seven words. Similar restrictions applied to mail received by them.

As expected, all mail from, and to, the prisoners was carefully censored. They were instructed not to write about anything but strictly

personal affairs. Any disregard for this draconian rule resulted in the confiscation of the letter or the excision of the offending part. This form of censorship led to quite ridiculous excesses, and applied equally to letters sent to the deportees. When the wife of an exile wrote "my mother's house in Sliema sustained some damage (in the blitz)" the dutiful censor quickly scissored out the word 'Sliema', presumably not to divulge war damage information to the enemy. Considering that the wretched woman owned only one house in Sliema, the censor's fervour hardly achieved its purpose.

This nonsense censorship led to a secondary result. Knowing well that nothing would escape the examiner's eagle eyes, the writers succumbed to a total discipline of self-censorship. They put down on paper nothing that would arouse the censor's zeal, and confined themselves to the most banal and inconsequential small-talk. I have sometimes been encouraged to publish father's letters from exile. There



The large marble plaque unveiled in the Law Courts in Valletta in 1994 to commemorate the Maltese internees and the judgements given by the Courts in their favour

is absolutely no point in doing that — they, and all those from the other prisoners, contain nothing of any interest or importance.

Special postal handstamps distinguished internee's mail. A small double ring cachet in red bore the circular inscription INT. CIV. MALTA (classified as INT-1). This was almost invariably stamped on the first right hand corner of the envelope, and seems to have been used only on mail outgoing from Fort S. Salvatore.

At the same time, a rectangular handstamp bearing the inscription INT CIV/MALTA on two lines (INT-2) came into use. This is found either on its own, or in conjunction with INT-1 and was used in blue and violet from Fort S. Salvatore and in red from other Maltese concentration camps. It also appears across the official labels used to reseal letters after opening for examination, to tie that label to the rest of the envelope.

A third cachet associated with internee mail is PASSED CENSOR I. C. and boxed rectangle (CS-INT-1). This appears both on the envelope, usually in combination with INT-1, and/or on the contents of the envelope, to certify that the letter had been approved. These handstamps, usually struck in blue or violet ink, mostly carry the censor's initials written in the rectangular border, on the envelope.

While the internees were still in the Maltese concentration camps, the postal authorities carried the mail unstamped. Many letters bear a manuscript "Prisoners of War Post" written by the sender, to facilitate identification.

The system changed after their deportation to Uganda. There postage stamps became necessary, though they were often removed by the censors to ensure that no secret messages lurked hidden under King George VI's beautifully embossed image.

Sources (books only)

- Sir Arturo Mercieca, *Le Mie Vicender*, Malta, 1947, later translated into *The Making and Unmaking of a Maltese Chief Justice*, Malta, 1969
Herbert Ganado, *Raji Malta Tinbidel*, vol 2, Malta, 1974
Ray Bondin, *Deportation 1942*, Malta, 1980
R.E. Martin (Ed), *Malta, The Postal History and Postage Stamps*, London, 1980
Edgar Soler, *The King's Guests in Uganda*, Malta, 1986
Carmel Farrugia, *Polluted Politics*, Malta, 1995
Albert Gauci (postumous), *Mistieden tar-Re!*, Malta, 1996