

JOSEPH F. GRIMA

VASSALLI'S PLAN FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION IN MALTA (1796)

One of the first - possibly the first - plans for primary education in Malta was the one advanced by Michael Anthony Vassalli, published in 1796. This plan is a four-page section entitled *Progetto* which is itself part of a forty-two page treatise introducing his *Ktyb yl Klym Malti mfisser byl-Latin u byl-Talyan sive liber dictionum Melitensium, hoc est Michaelis Antonii Vassalli Lexicon Melitense-Latino-Italum* published in Rome by Antonio Fulgoni. Very rightly, Vassalli is regarded as the 'Father of the Maltese Tongue', and it was indeed mainly to further the cause of his native language that Vassalli promulgated the plan under discussion.

A Short Biography

Vassalli was born at Żebbuġ, Malta, on March 5, 1764. His family surname was Vassallo but, using the Latin Genitive form as early as 1788, he has remained known as Vassalli. His family seems to have had some land and this sufficed to give him an education. He studied for the priesthood and was a cleric in Minor Orders but never attended the Mdina Seminary. He studied at Rome but was never ordained.

He published a Maltese Grammar at Rome in 1791 and probably returned to Malta in late 1794 or in early 1795. In 1795, he petitioned Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan Polduc for permission to open a school in which he proposed to teach the Maltese language which would then be the medium through which other languages would be learnt. Permission was obtained on April 11, 1795 but it is not yet known whether the school did actually open or, if it did open, how long it remained functioning.

In 1796, he published the above-mentioned *Lexicon* and later became involved in plots against the Order of St John. He was imprisoned at Fort Ricasoli in 1797 but was released by the French when they captured Malta in June 1798. When the Maltese revolted against the French in September 1798, he remained in Valletta but left the city a year later and was immediately imprisoned by the besiegers. After the French left Malta in 1800, Vassalli was exiled - during which time he got married - and returned to Malta in 1820. He befriended the Hon. John Hookham Frere who obtained for him the Chair of Maltese at the University in 1825 and he further tried to eke out a miserable living by translating parts of the Bible for the Protestant "Church Missionary Society". He died in poverty on January 12, 1829 and was buried in an unmarked grave, probably at the Msida Bastion Cemetery.

Education Plan for Primary Schools

In his 1796 plan Vassalli points out that, hitherto, no Maltese grammar or dictionary was available so that tuition on this subject could be given. This deficiency was now remedied and students therefore now had the tools with which to embark on a different type of tuition.

Primarily, Vassalli wrote, there was the need to institute throughout Malta and Gozo a number of public schools (not in the English sense) in which pupils would be taught how to read and write their native language together with other subjects such as Arithmetic, Christian Doctrine, Letters and similar subjects. Therefore, childhood could be utilised to channel the pupils to that line of study to which they were inclined - or to which their parents had chosen for them - be it the arts, the sciences or trade.

If they chose to stop their schooling and start working, the pupils would have enough knowledge in reading and writing to ensure that their basic needs - such as letter writing, calculations and signatures - were satisfied. On the other hand, they could obtain those principles which would hold them in good stead and make good citizens out of them, irrespective of whether they discontinued or cut short their studies.

These schools were to be outside the control of the University or the Seminary and were to be open to all. Therefore, schools were to be established in almost all the villages of the Maltese islands and would have staffs, depending on local population numbers, of one to three persons, viz., a teacher, an assistant teacher and a helper. Vassalli envisaged the recruiting of about thirty teachers, twenty helpers and seventeen (or eighteen) assistant teachers.

The following large population areas would have all three of the above-mentioned officials in each school: four schools at Valletta, two at Rabat in Gozo, one or two at Cospicua, and one each at Senglea, Vittoriosa, Żejtun, Żurrieq, Żebbuġ (Malta), Qormi, Birkirkara, Lija (to serve also Balzan and Attard), Naxxar and Rabat (in Malta). A teacher and a helper would be assigned to each of the following: Floriana, Żabbar, Siggiewi and Mosta. Less populated areas like Ghaxaq, Tarxien, Luqa, Gharghur, Qrendi, Mqabba, Gharb and Nadur would be assigned one teacher for each school.

All the schools were to follow a common method of teaching and subjects, with uniformity being imposed by frequent inspection, a system which would also help to reward the diligent. Vassalli asserted that the beneficial effects of such schools would be felt in less than five years because he was writing about disseminating universal principles necessary to a nation. One notes that Vassalli was the first to knowingly call the Maltese a nation though this has also been attributed to Giovanni Myriti in the 16th century.

Vassalli could not imagine that there should be valid opposition to his schemes and proposals because various existing institutions were certainly less interesting in the way they were functioning. He also noted that there was a sort of 'craving' to teach mutes how to speak but he argued that, primarily, it made more sense to teach the others how to speak properly and make better use of the language at their disposal.

Vassalli knew quite well that the major obstacle to his proposals would be the financing of these schools. However, he had a plan. The schools could be housed in small churches or chapels which would not be said to be improperly used because one of the subjects taught would be the rudiments and principles of the Christian

religion. Expenses for benches, candles, prizes and similar objects could be obtained from various collections, as was the usage of less important objectives. He suggested annual salaries of 90 and 50 scudi for the teachers and assistant teachers respectively whilst the helpers would be given prizes and promotion, according to merit. Vassalli calculated that the necessary annual sum needed to implement his ideas would amount to about 3,500 scudi, but points out that the authorities somehow always managed to finance any project if they thought it to be important enough. However, he suggested that the easiest way would be for each village (or town) to have its own collection box to finance its local school. He stressed that education was a necessity and should take priority over the multiplicity of petty and frivolous collections carried out. If this method could not be implemented, Vassalli opined that just four per cent of the church's revenues would be sufficient to bring his ideas to fruition.

He ended by appealing to all Maltese not to oppose such ideas and not to heed the arguments of those who opposed for egoistic reasons.

General Comments

Vassalli's short treatise and exposition of his educational ideas may actually be considered to be Malta's first report on primary education. The report itself is coherent and, although sketchy, does outline a number of ideas leading to a unified system of primary schooling. So far (i.e. till 1796), although primary schools did exist in almost every local village, yet there was no real unified system of schooling. Teachers were mainly ecclesiastics who were expected to satisfy their ecclesiastic superiors not only with regard to the material knowledge they could impart but also from the spiritual side. Yet the teaching of each school depended on the actual teacher. There was as yet no real unified curriculum development. But Vassalli was here proposing the setting up of schools all carrying out a common syllabus.

His ideas were, in a sense, revolutionary because his ideas implied changing the way teaching was carried out and orientating a new system based on the teaching of Maltese. Maltese was to be taught first and would then become the medium of instruction. Therefore, one notes that his ideas implied the use and learning of Maltese to help instil a national identity and he was, in fact, the first to refer to a *Maltese nation*. He had already given the lead by obtaining permission to open a school teaching Maltese.

Perhaps it is pertinent to note what was envisaged by way of a primary schooling system two years later, in 1798, when the French captured Malta since, after all, this was the first known unified primary school system to be attempted, at least on paper, excluding, of course, Vassalli's plan. It was decreed that fifteen primary schools were to be established in Malta and Gozo in which the following subjects were to be taught: French reading and writing, the elements of Arithmetic and pilotage, and the principles of Morals and of the French Constitution. Expenses were to be defrayed from the proceeds of suppressed religious convents.

One may perhaps limit himself to three points, viz:

(1) Somewhat similarly, Vassalli had wanted to use Church property for education but *not* through the suppression of religious entitles. Vassalli wanted to use chapels as schools and not more than four per cent of 'religious' income, through some benefices, for their financing.

(2) Vassalli thought in terms of double the amount of schools the French had in mind which would have meant more chances of education for many more people.

(3) What the French had in mind was not really to educate the people but rather to mould them into *good French citizens*. They did not care a fig about Maltese nationalism, hence the choice of subjects to be taught. Contrast this with Vassalli's promotion of the national tongue. Actually, it was only forty years after Vassalli's 'report', through the report of the Royal Commission of 1836, that an attempt was made to introduce the teaching of Maltese to Maltese classrooms.

To sum up, one can best appreciate Vassalli's ideas for primary education by comparing them with:

- i) what was in existence in 1796 and
- ii) examining what was attempted in 1798.

It is said that comparisons are odious but, in our case, Vassalli's ideas stand out as a shining beacon contrasting with the darkness prevailing in 1798. This enhances his standing as a great patriot who saw the education of the masses as the first step towards the attainment of a national identity.