

New book on Borg Pisani published in Italy (*The Sunday Times*, 10/06/2007)

Although more than 60 years have passed since the end of World War II and one time bitter enemies are now members of the same Union, Carmelo Borg Pisani, the Maltese irredentist whose life ended on the gallows in November 1942, is still remembered in Italy. A few weeks ago *Lo Scarabeo* of Bologna published *Carmelo Borg Pisani (1915-1942) – eroe o traditore?* The author, 47-year-old Stefano Fabei, is a university professor from Passignano (Perugia), who has penned various other works of Historical interest. Unlike other publications which dealt with the same topic, this very recent work by Professor Fabei is, in my opinion, more objective, based more on documented facts than on partisan preconceptions, though I hasten to add his admiration for the young idealist, who was obsessed with the dream of seeing his beloved Malta “reunited” with “Mother” Italy, can be felt throughout his work.

Professor Fabei quotes extensively from books and periodicals which have been published from time to time during the past 65 years, mostly in Italy but also elsewhere, including Malta, and from official documents like the *Archivio Centrale dello Stato*, *Archivio dell'Ufficio Storico dello Stato Maggiore dell'Esercito* and the *Archivio della Marina Militare dei Caduti di Guerra*, to mention just three.

The author deals at some length with the historical aspect Malta's Latin culture, its links with Sicily and the peninsula, and the political developments in Malta after the mid-19th century with particular reference to the vexed language question.

This information helps the uninformed reader to appreciate Borg Pisani's obsession with all that was even remotely associated with Italy, an obsession that let the young Maltese art student not only to opt to remain in Rome when the war appeared imminent but also to enrol in the Italian army and later embark on the fatal spying mission in the spring of 1942. The information that the author has obtained from certain sources, which were published during the war, like Puccio's *Vita di Carmelo Borg Pisani* and the special edition of *Malta* dedicated to Borg Pisani, should be familiar to those who have read my first two books on the subject, not to mention the few who had access to the material long before I published my books.

However, there is considerable information that many would find new and interesting in the work by Professor Fabei. For example, the author mentions the fact that when Borg Pisani claimed that he was being harassed by officials of the US embassy in Rome (which was looking after British interests when Italy entered the war) to start working for them and to “apply again” for British citizenship, which incidentally he never renounced, at least not officially, he was not believed by the Ministry of Interior.

Another piece of interesting information is that in February 1942 when the plans for the invasion of Malta were still very much alive, Benito Mussolini was in close collaboration not only with the Germans but also with the Japanese, who had obtained a great deal of experience in the Far East on landing operations during invasions.

The plans for the invasion of Malta by the Axis are amply and most interestingly dealt with in the book. The author writes about the preparations that had been made in Italy for the landing and the pressure the Italians put on the Germans to make them give their consent and embark on the invasion which, according to the author, were practically abandoned in July 1942.

Not surprisingly, Professor Fabei dedicates the longest chapter in the book to Borg Pisani's mission; his selection by the Italians, the intensive training that he received; his last will, written on April 27 (1942), and his premonition that he would not survive the ordeal.

According to an article that appeared in a military publication in April 1943, Borg Pisani had stated “*È un peccato non poter morire a Roma. Noi irredenti dobbiamo morire così*” (It

is a pity not to be able to die in Rome. We irredentists have to die like this.)

Details on what happened to Borg Pisani after his landing in Malta and his eventual recognition, his arrest and the subsequent intensive interrogation by the security people are accurately given, except for some minor details. The same can be said about the trial and his execution.

Professor Fabei makes it clear that the Maltese artist was not, as reported in Italy at the time, tried by a British tribunal and shot, but that it was Maltese judges who had found him guilty of treason and condemned him to die on the gallows.

The author makes reference to the countless parliamentary questions, which have been put by Italian MPs on the subject over the years, with particular reference to Borg Pisani's remains and their possible transference in Italy.

As recently April 2005, a former naval officer, Sergio Rocchi, who served in Malta as member of the Italian Military Mission between 1997 and 2000, wrote to President Emeritus Guido de Marco *“per sensibilizzarlo circa la necessità di dare finalmente una dignitosa sepoltura a Borg Pisani”* (about the need to finally give a decent burial to Borg Pisani).

In his letter he proposed that Borg Pisani's remains be exhumed and transferred to Kalkara military cemetery. Should this not possible, he added, a symbolic commemorative ceremony could be held at the place where his remains are buried.

Perhaps the most persistent and determined has been a certain naval officer, Captain Paolo Gulminelli. Having failed in his attempts to move the Italian foreign ministry and the ministry of the defence to take the necessary steps and have transferred to Italy *“anche un mucchio di ossa”* (a handful of bones), Gulminelli on June 12, 2006, took the case before the European Court of Human Rights, pleading that this his request be met the Italian authorities.

His request, however, was turned down. He was also informed by the three judges that he could not appeal the sentence.

Concluding the chapter, and the book, the author openly expresses his admiration for the Maltese idealist and his own contempt for those who had sent him to a certain death. “We hold”, he wrote, “that in the protagonist of the sad story, which we have tried to relate, one can see above anything else a generous young idealist who in pursuit of his dream became a victim of the incompetence and superficiality of those – be they political or military who had planned the whole operation and more or less knew of the outcome, sent him to his death which he faced with great courage.

“We therefore hold that more than for anything else he deserves the respect of all, regardless of political considerations or historical judgements”. (*Riteniamo che questo, più di qualsiasi altra considerazione, lo rendano meritevole dell'unanime rispetto, al di là delle posizioni politiche e dei giudizi storici di ognuno.*)

The tribute that was paid to Borg Pisani by Carlo Mallia at the Camera dei Fasci on April 17, 1943, and which is reproduced verbatim in the appendices, confirms that he was in no way responsible for sending the young idealist on the fatal mission.

In his address, Professor Mallia, after recounting how Borg Pisani had gone to see him just before he left for Malta, said: “When he handed me his will I felt it my duty to act as his parents would have acted. I drew his attention to the grave risks that they would have told him in the circumstances.”

In the preface, President Emeritus de Marco wrote, among other things, that it was not easy to pass judgment on Borg Pisani and his actions even 65 years after his tragic death. For those, he wrote, whose dream was to see Malta united with Italy, Borg Pisani was a hero. Those who during World War II lived in Malta and experienced the suffering and the destruction brought about by the heavy bombardments of the German and Italian planes, saw in him a traitor. However, states Professor de Marco, he deserves neither the

adulation of one side nor the contempt of the other...

Borg Pisani is not an enigmatic figure. He was a simple young man endowed with firm principles who should be given the respect that those who are prepared to give up their life for their ideals deserve.

This latest book on Borg Pisani by reputed writer and historian Stefano Fabei is a valuable contribution on a controversial issue, which merits to be seen objectively, in its proper context, now that almost 70 years have passed since those turbulent years of the Second World War.

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