

ian. Even though Carlo Goldoni, the most prolific of Italian dramatists (no fewer than 250 plays!), occasionally wrote his plays in the Venetian dialect, it was for him a local *divertimento*, no more. Most of them were written in Italian, and even in French—which, in 18th century Europe, was regarded (rightly or wrongly) as the language *par excellence* of polite society, and thus used as a natural *lingua franca* by another extraordinary Venetian, Giovanni Jacopo Casanova, the self-ennobled “Chevalier de Seingalt,” whose “shocking” memoirs are certainly among the most entertaining ever penned by a robust *bon vivant*.

Like Milanese, like Venetian, like Neapolitan, like Genoese and Pisan—and I mention these two because various parts of the island were, at different times, ruled by Pisan “counts” and Genoese mariners and robber-bankers—Corsican is a dialectal derivative of Italian. Last September, Jean-Guy Talamoni, a vociferous advocate of Corsican “nationalism,” explained (in an interview granted to a Paris weekly) that he did not recognize the *Marseillaise* as being his national anthem. His national anthem was, and would always remain, Corsica’s “*Salve regina . . .*”

I must confess that I feel some sympathy for this point of view, but for quite different, non-nationalistic reasons. The *Marseillaise*—with its bellicose call to arms of an embattled citizenry, enjoined to form themselves into battalions—was written by Rouget de Lisle, a French captain of Engineers in April 1792, shortly after the newly created Republic had declared war on Imperial Austria, the homeland of the soon-to-be-executed queen, Marie Antoinette. It was a typically chest-beating, muscle-flexing piece of superpatriotic doggerel, and every bit as stupid and intemperate as such later exercises in the same bellicose genre as August Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s “*Deutschland! Deutschland über alles!*” and the British national anthem, in the second verse of which God is asked to “confound the knavish tricks” of the king (or queen) of England’s enemies. Compared to this rhetorical rubbish, the “*Salve Regina . . .*” of the Corsicans comes close to being poetry. But it is not Corsican but Latin poetry that is involved; and the Queen whose merciful aid is here invoked to save the plague-stricken and oft-exploited inhabitants of the lovely island is the Catholic Church’s “*Queen of Heaven*,” better known to us

as the Virgin Mary.

I know very little about Jean-Pierre Talamoni’s religious beliefs, but I frankly doubt that they have had much influence on his political convictions. Corsican “patriots,” like those who founded the originally clandestine but now officially tolerated *Armata Corsa* movement (one of whose leaders, Jean-Michel Rossi, was mysteriously assassinated in August 2000) or who swear allegiance to Talamoni’s *Corsica Nazione*, keep denouncing the “*jacobine*” oppression to which they have been subjected for the past two centuries by political and administrative “centralists” in Paris. But nothing could be more “*jacobine*” and intolerant than their openly avowed aim to make the teaching of Corsican a compulsory obligation in all of the island’s schools.

Not long ago, a Corsican friend of mine, who happens to belong to one of the island’s most distinguished families, was informed that the name of the village near Ajaccio from which the family had derived its name would have to be “Corsicanized” (in French, “*corsisé*”). This peremptory declaration was made by a “university” official closely linked to the so-called “Territorial Assembly” (composed of 51 members from 16 different factions) in the “capital” of Corte. A picturesque old burg dominated by the ruins of a medieval *castello*, in the mountainous “hinterland” of the island, Corte is little more than a one-horse town (it barely numbers 5,500 inhabitants), which, a few years ago, was elevated to the rank of “capital” and offered a “university” in an effort to circumvent the traditional rivalry between the northern sea-

port of Bastia and Napoleon’s hometown of Ajaccio, with its quaint, ochre-hued houses and its magnificent crescent-shaped bay. Although tax receipts and other documents obtained from the senate archives in Genoa indicated that the village’s name had remained unchanged from the early 16th century on, my friend was informed by the university “professor” in Corte that the ancestral name would have to be changed on the official records “in the name of the spontaneity and authenticity of the local toponymy, the Tuscanized forms being more derived from literary forms, and thus imported.” “What those people are doing,” my friend exclaimed with a mixture of amusement and disgust, “is inventing a crazy new language!”—in a war of “liberation” fought not only against French administrative rule but against the “tyranny” of the Italian language.

It certainly is crazy—and Lilliputian, too. For all this hubbub concerns the “national” future of no more than 250,000 souls—roughly one 50th of the population of “greater Paris,” or of what is more elegantly called *l’Île de France*. Islanders do not even have enough “Corsophonics” instructors capable of teaching the local vernacular in the island’s 44 *lycées* and secondary-school *collèges*. But nothing more flatters the wounded ego of certain Corsicans than the idea that, by occasionally blowing up a French fiscal bureau or other administrative building, or even by assassinating a prefect (as happened two years ago to the luckless Claude Erignac), the fearless Corsican David will eventually reduce the arrogant French Goliath to such a state of fear and trembling that he

Eisenstadt’s Kiss

August 15, 1945

by Bruce Guernsey

I dream for my parents it was just like this:
the anonymous sailor, the anonymous nurse,

her head in his arm, his hand at her waist,
on Times Square that day in August

about when my father came down the ramp
and they kissed like those strangers I hope,

bending together, my father and mother,
curve into curve, these mythical lovers.

will toss in the sponge and grant the island its independence. This would constitute the sweet, long-overdue revenge of the genuine patriots against the *pinzutti* (literally, the “pointed ones”), the sarcastic appellation applied by the “natives” to the intrusive French because of the pointed caps (similar to those of the Redcoats during the American War of Independence) worn by King Louis XV’s soldiery when, after centuries of manifest indifference to the fate of this lovely island, they finally invaded Corsica in 1768—one year before the birth of Napoleone Buonaparte (whose ancestors, according to the man who later became his father-in-law, Emperor Francis I of Austria, came from Treviso, just south of the Dolomites, in north-eastern Italy).

And after that, what? Well, having created an “authentic” new language and renamed Ajaccio “Aïacciu,” these super-patriots will probably feel the need to establish their “national” identity by rewriting the turbulent history of their island. It will not be an easy task, at any rate as regards the events of the past 200 years. For these “historians” will have to invent some ingenious reason to explain why, following the example of the great Napoleon, so many “renegades” preferred to leave their homeland to try their luck in metropolitan France. For, in this respect at least, the Corsicans resemble the Irish. For every Corsican willing to remain on the island, there are at least five or six who chose and still go on choosing to make their political, financial, and (in some cases) gangster fortunes “beyond the brine.” One of them is Jean Tiberi, the distinctly controversial ex-mayor of Paris.

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Letter From Palermo

by Andrei Navrozov

Public Relations



“All the cars you see around here,” yet another taxidriver bringing me from the Grand Hotel Villa Igica to the congested

center of town began in a confidential undertone, “it wasn’t always like that, you know. Before, it was all carriages.” Then, after a pause that he reckoned was long enough for the average tourist to appreciate fully the historic significance of the news he had just imparted: “Would you like me to take you to the airport when you’re leaving?” Well, I had news for him: I wasn’t leaving.

Coming from Venice to Palermo as something other than a tourist is a bizarre experience, a little like what I imagine a *Social Register* Brahmin might feel on having to move from the Park Avenue apartment he finally inherited from his great uncle to the most socially desirable building in Des Moines. “Oooh,” says practically everyone in Des Moines, “have you seen where Mr. Brahmin is living? That amazing new place behind the shopping mall? And you can see the park from every window? He must’ve paid a million dollars for that.” I don’t want to offend anyone, because of course I’ve never been to Des Moines and don’t know if it has parks and shopping malls, but the point I’m making is actually not uncomplimentary. I can even believe that Des Moines is a wonderful place to live. It’s just that it probably wouldn’t be as wonderful as the Upper East Side, in that New Yorker’s considered opinion. And if he’s got a wife, forget it.

All this is bolstered by the defensiveness of the average native, who wants to show the visitor from abroad all the things that, to his counterintuitive mind, make Palermo a social and cultural peer of Venice, Rome, or London. History? Before there were houses, we used to live in *huts*. Frescoed ceilings? There is a building around the corner from where my cousin lives—it’s got those. Real pretty, *Ottocento*. Too bad they had to make it into a gas station after the war. Culture? We’ve got the university somewhere over there. Or the *library*, anyway. No, that’s the county court. Social life? There’s now even a shop open on the Corso that sells *Chanelle*! You know, the French designer. And so on, when what the fellow should be pointing out instead is that the octopus here is fatter, the girls are prettier, the coffee in every bar is better than the best outside of Naples, the pastries are the *couture* equivalent of what one finds elsewhere in Italy, and the Teatro Massimo is, without exaggeration, a world-class opera theater.

The other nearly insuperable problem the *Palermitani* are up against is that in

most tourist imaginations—those postcard places where Venice is sinking, Parisian cooking is all butter, English boys are molested nightly, and Santa Claus lives in the Kremlin—Palermo means the mafia. But, as I have more or less hinted on previous occasions, the rest of the world is sinking much faster than Venice in every conceivable sense; and just about every nation, every city, every social class, and every profession in this not-yet-completely totalitarian universe of ours boasts a mafia of one sort or another. Some of these, like the lawyers in the United States, are so obviously powerful that they have no need of violence; others, like the *internationale* of contemporary art with its associated galleries, museums, and media, are so well entrenched that their preeminence is never questioned; while still others, like the Sicilian mafia or the *Propriétaires-Éditeurs* of the *Michelin Guide*, are contented to perform their traditional roles in society, such as teaching people good manners and where to eat well.

“Even in Palermo we have the mafia,” beamed the *maitre d’hotel* at the famous Charleston in the resort suburb of Mondello, imperiously waving away my healthy and otherwise perfectly attractive packet of cash the other night as soon as Alfredo G— had winked that he was paying for dinner. One can say that this kind of joke would slip easily from the lips of any quick-thinking flunky anywhere, but I would argue that it has a more transcendent meaning here. Social order before everything. *La cosa nostra* is good manners.

Last week, a little girl was kidnapped in the province of Trapani. But apparently the brigands had picked on the wrong baby—a baby, as it were, with the right connections—because 24 hours later, she was restored to her family, her clothes all new and a tiny gold chain around her neck as an added sign of contrition. Nonetheless, that same evening the child’s grandfather went on the local television news to apologize to all of Sicily, saying that, if he had offended anyone, the slight had been inadvertent, and that, in the future, he would take care to treat everybody better. I don’t think I have ever seen a more elegant exercise in conflict resolution under any political system.

“And therefore?” you may interject. Well, I generally tend to put my money where my mouth is, and just at the moment my mouth is full of *cassata*, the