

CHAPTER VIII

SEVEN YEARS OF EXILE IN HIS OWN COUNTRY

The exiled Alessandro Malaspina returned to Italy in 1803. By a curious turn of fate, the Marquise of Matallana had preceded him, first to Genoa and then to Parma, and within the next ten years the other protagonists of his painful experience – Father Gil, Charles IV, Queen María Luisa, and Manuel Godoy – were also to set foot on Italian soil. Moreover, the last three of these were also exiles, and perhaps with more bitterness in their hearts, since the kind of life they were forced to abandon had been much sweeter. Malaspina, however, did not live long enough to read of their arrival on the Italian Peninsula.

The exiled man reached Genoa toward the middle of March in 1803. We do not know if, upon disembarking, he turned to contemplate the sea. Whatever he did at that moment, this had been perhaps his last maritime voyage.

In the Ligurian city of Genoa he must have felt obligated to visit Longhi, the merchant who for so many years and in so many ways had served as the link between Alessandro, his family and his Italian friends. Undoubtedly Longhi had kept him apprised of the political and economic situation in Italy, and in particular of the situation in the Lunigiana region, from which Alessandro had been absent for more than forty years.

During those years everything had changed. The small feudal territories governed by the different branches of the Malaspina family had been swept away by the Napoleonic cyclone. All of these territories had been combined into the Italian Republic, whose capital was Milan, which, together with the former Duchy of Massa, comprised a sub-prefecture of the Crostolo Department. The bordering states had also undergone institutional and dynastic modifications. The aristocratic Republic of Genoa had been “democratized” and had become the Ligurian Republic; the Bourbons had been thrown out of the Duchy of Parma, and at the death of the old Duke Ferdinando the state had fallen under the direct administration of France. The Grand Duchy of Tuscany, from which Ferdinand of Lorraine had been deposed, was assigned to the Duke of Parma’s son Ludovico, who had married María Luisa, the daughter of Charles IV. The territory had been renamed the Kingdom of Etruria, but the sovereign was dying, consumed by madness.

In general, the irrational political subdivisions of Lunigiana remained, and consequently the population, although now composed of “citizens” instead of “subjects,” continued to suffer from economic and civil discrimination. In addition, the new system had introduced two highly unpopular institutions which had been totally unknown during the old feudal regime: revenue taxes and obligatory military service.

Alessandro headed for the family seat in Mulazzo, where he immediately received bad news. His two sisters now lived away, one as a cloistered nun in Florence and the other – Metilda – as a married woman in Benevento. The problem was with his surviving brother, Luigi. An avaricious, indolent and dissolute man, Luigi had not administered the



Figure 22. *The church of Santa Maria del Pòpolo in Pontremoli.* Engraving by Gandini, 1830.

family patrimony with the necessary diligence and honesty, and the family had suffered from his negligence. To compound the problem, the estates had diminished because of the abolition of feudal service, although the Malaspinas, along with the other former marquises, continued to be the major landlords of the region. However, the hereditary situation of the Malaspina brothers was unclear. For different reasons they each had claims on the other, as a result of which Alessandro was forced into a protracted and bothersome suit against his brother.

Among the items in litigation was the castle in Mulazzo, which was now abandoned and in ruins. Luigi had already taken from it most of the marble and many of the better building stones and this had only hastened its deterioration.

To hurry the legal process along, Alessandro decided to establish himself in Pontremoli. Although it was only ten kilometres from Mulazzo, the two towns belonged to different states because of the recent political changes. Pontremoli, the old regional capital under the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, was now part of the Kingdom of Etruria.

Alessandro rented a manor there which was quite close to the one later occupied by Luigi on Via Fiorentina. Some misleading things have been said about this move. Because he rented, rather than bought, the manor, many have taken this as proof of the ex-officer's poverty. The truth is quite different, as can easily be inferred from his correspondence of that period. The fact is that Malaspina continued to cling to the hope that he would be rehabilitated, that he would have his exile revoked and career restored. Since he was nearing the age of fifty, he no longer expected to serve Spain at sea, but he was convinced that there were plenty of contexts in which he could be useful to the nation. Above all, he hoped to be able to spend his last years near his few remaining friends in the Iberian Peninsula, friends with whom he shared more memories than he did with any he had in Italy. With such hopes the acquisition of a palace would have been for

him an act of renunciation. He rejected the idea of forever surrendering his quest for justice, and with it his return—to the congratulations of those in Spain who had never doubted his rectitude.

With this in mind he set about organizing the household, furnished it with a certain comfort, and hung some British prints on the living room walls. He established contact with the most important people of the town and made new friends, among whom were the Marquis Andrea Pavesi, who had been of great assistance to his mother in her later years, the local dean and lawyer Carlo Bologna, who was also a literary man, and Giovanni Pizzati, a gentleman who was animated by a deep passion for the public good.

Alessandro sent for his personal effects from Spain. These were mainly books, among which were the monumental works of Buffon. He had also left some nautical instruments in Spain, but he knew that he would not use them any more and sold them on the best terms possible.

Alessandro's family members, as well as the local managers of the old feudal estates (which had eventually been designated municipalities), soon came to appreciate the mariner's extraordinary talents, his fair-mindedness, and his innate capacity to seize the essential point of problems and find solutions to them. Consequently, they began to seek him out for advice, suggestions, or simply personal recommendations. Requests for recommendations were especially numerous since they knew of his old friendship with Melzi d'Eril, Vice-President of the Italian Republic.

Indeed, Alessandro's first thought after his arrival in Italy was for that friend, and as soon as he was able, he went to Milan to visit him. We do not know the details of that meeting, but it must have been cordial and moving, due in part to the memory of Paolo Greppi, their mutual friend who in the interim had died.

Contemporaries claim that the Vice-President of the Republic asked Malaspina to take the post of Minister of War, and that the old officer refused the offer. The papers of Melzi d'Eril support this claim, but it would be erroneous to think that Alessandro's refusal was based upon his wish to remain aloof from matters of state. It is more likely that he rejected the offer of public office so that he would not compromise his chance to return to the service of Spain. And in fact he did agree to inspect the Adriatic coast of the Republic and to suggest what defensive works were needed to renovate its harbours in order to guarantee an efficient maritime defence. It was a project in which Melzi had great interest, and it was to be carried out by Malaspina along with his old and unforgotten friend Alessandro Belmonti (brother-in-law of Daniele Felici, the Minister of the Interior), who was the military and administrative head of the harbour at Rimini. Malaspina made the necessary preparations with his old comrade in arms and took leave of Melzi.

Before returning to Lunigiana he stopped at Cremona to see the family of Fabio Ala Ponzone, the midshipman of the *Descubierta*, and also to see the former Jesuit, Ramón Ximénez. When he passed through Parma he met with another eminent Spanish former Jesuit, Juan Andrés, the author of a valuable literary treatise. The navigator let the man read the manuscript of his monetary treatise, and the Spaniard complimented him profusely. As a result, he planned to make a finished copy of a draft he had already completed, which was to become the second part of the work.

In Milan he had been introduced to the highest aristocracy. They sought him out because they were fascinated by the dramatic hardships he had experienced. Although

there were many temptations for him to set up residence in Milan, he resisted because he wanted to return to Lunigiana. There he had his interests to look after, he had his beloved mountains, and he had a simple life which would have been impossible in Milan. He wrote to Ximénez, "My peace of mind made me want to put the Apennines between the capital and my obscure and innocent home."

At the time the most urgent problem for the inhabitants of Lunigiana was the pressure of taxation. The government of the Republic was overwhelmed by military expenses especially, and consequently imposed its levies in an alarming fashion. The most hated was the praedial tax, which affected landowners. The government levied it flatly according to the extent of property owned, which was oppressive because it meant that the owner of poor land paid just as much as the owner of the same amount of rich land. The weight of this tribute was bearable for the taxpayers of the Po's fertile plain, but not for the landowners of Lunigiana, whose fields were made up primarily of woods or stony tracts, and yielded poor harvests consisting mostly of chestnuts, along with some oil and wine.

The local administrators, who had also once been property owners, voiced the difficulties of their constituents, as well as their own. On more than one occasion they presented the problem to Malaspina, who showed an interest in the matter (in part because he was one of the major contributors) and addressed it in various ways. Thus we know that he prepared detailed and well-reasoned submissions which reached the government of the Italian Republic. Moreover, recent archival research has shown that many other documents, supposedly written by the Lunigiana municipalities, were in fact from Malaspina's pen.

A fundamental difference can in fact be detected between the documents prepared by him and those presented by other citizens and local administrators. While the latter limited themselves generally to a litany of vague complaints, and insisted that it was impossible to comply with the tax payments imposed by the law, Malaspina, by contrast, made an effort to demonstrate the problem with precise arguments supported by meticulous calculations.

This method did not differ much from the one he had followed when he was studying the Spanish possessions overseas. In those cases, Malaspina customarily began with a preliminary description of the territory in question, and of its potential resources and real productivity; then he studied the ethnic and psychological characteristics of the population that inhabited it; then he framed the whole in a more global description of its climate and environment; and finally he proceeded to offer concrete proposals, explaining their advantages over the existing situation. These proposals were meant to be beneficial to the local residents without hurting the state in any way.

In 1804, after having led the opposition to the praedial tax policy in the municipalities of Tresana and Mulazzo, he set out for Milan equipped with three exhaustive presentations to be given respectively to Melzi d'Eril, to the Revenue Minister, Giuseppe Prina, and to the Minister of the Interior, Daniele Felici. Malaspina's proposals for taxation were accepted only in part, because the government believed that the protests of the Lunigiana contributors were somewhat exaggerated. And after the restructuring of the vice-prefecture, his suggestions for administrative reform were finally put into practice, which ended some of the causes of popular discontent.

However, the many disaffected people still continued to complain. Consequently, within three months of his return to Italy the old officer had managed to address a broad range of issues, as a result of which many people placed their confidence in him: his relatives, in the hope of reclaiming part of their confiscated holdings; the local administrators, who counted on having their demands heard thanks to his intercession; the townspeople, who always had some problem to resolve; and litigants of all sorts, who tried to reach an agreement or a satisfactory accommodation with their opponents.

Malaspina tried to satisfy them all, although on one occasion his action caused a confrontation with his distant relative from Naples, Giuseppe, when he attempted to mediate a dispute between Giuseppe and Carlo Emanuele di Fosdinovo.

Toward the end of 1804 an event took place that led the old officer to leave Lunigiana to demonstrate once more his organizational abilities. In Livorno, the main port of the Kingdom of Etruria, a dangerous epidemic broke out. The disease, apparently yellow fever, spread rapidly, and in a short time all of Italy was seized by the terror of contagion.

The government of the Italian Republic saw the need to create a Central Institute of Health. This body ordered the organization of a *cordon sanitaire* stretching along the frontier between the Republic and the Kingdom of Etruria, i.e., from the Tyrrhenian Sea to the Bolognese Apennines. Alessandro Malaspina was named director of this project and set to work immediately. The aging man wrote in great modesty about his work in this new endeavour, and even showed some dissatisfaction with the measures adopted. He wrote to Ximénez, saying, "I am a bird that drowns in shallow waters." But we know that his results were excellent. The epidemic did not spread beyond the Tuscan frontier, although Alessandro himself fell ill and submitted to the quarantine that he had imposed on those suspected of having contracted yellow fever. Because of his illness, he was forced to resign from his post (replaced, perhaps at his recommendation, by his friend Belmonti), and happily returned to Pontremoli as soon as he was in a condition to travel.

The government was pleased with his performance, and soon afterward the official bulletin of the administration printed the news that "Citizen Malaspina" had been named State Councillor. It does not seem that he fulfilled this office in an active way, however. The State Council was purely a consultative body. Napoleon, who thought very little of the capacities and leanings of Italian statesmen, had created it by decree, but Malaspina could not imagine himself in this sort of public activity. Besides, it was already the spring of 1805, and Napoleon was in the process of creating an institutional reform by which the Republic would become a kingdom whose crown Napoleon himself would take, with his step-son Eugène de Beauharnais to be named Viceroy. Francesco Melzi d'Eril, although he held the confidence of the sovereign, and had some influence with him, nevertheless found himself relegated to a secondary role, and this must have been what discouraged Malaspina from making any sort of commitment. However, he prepared himself to attend the ostentatious coronation ceremony in Milan, and if he did not go it was only because of some mishap or other.

In any case, in 1805 he had another opportunity to demonstrate his ability to find concrete solutions to political-administrative problems. The opportunity arose because of the difficulties that the customs authorities of the Kingdom of Italy had in controlling the contraband in salt. Salt was found along the coast of the Tyrrhenian Sea, which belonged to the Kingdom of Etruria. It was sold mainly in Emilia and Lombardy, which formed

part of the Kingdom of Italy, but in order to cross Lunigiana, which, as we have mentioned, was criss-crossed by a series of irrational borders, substantial duties had to be paid. This multiplied bureaucratic red tape and encouraged smuggling. Malaspina studied the problem and proposed the free trade of a determined annual quantity of salt, which corresponded to Lunigiana's needs, and then the establishment of an equalizing compensation among the different states. The loss in tax revenues would be made up by savings in the cost of processing the different duties. It was a good idea which he demonstrated by means of exact accounting. To implement it, however, required a cooperation and an understanding between the governments of Milan and Florence that was non-existent, and Malaspina had neither the time nor the interest to try to impose his ideas on characters defined by their mental indolence. "Let be what must be," he wrote to Ximénez, and then turned his attention to his own problems.

Among these problems, the one that prevailed was his health. During the summer of 1806, Alessandro was gravely ill, and felt his life to be in danger. As a result, he decided to write his first will (which has only recently been discovered). Apart from some bequests to his servants, Alessandro left his entire estate to his sister Metilda.

Afterwards, however, he recovered his health and travelled to Milan. There he felt more ill at ease than ever in political circles, but there were reasons that from time to time impelled him to stay. Among the Lombard aristocracy, Alessandro most usually visited the family of Antonio Litta, the Grand Chamberlain of the kingdom, who was married to Barbarina Barbiano di Belgiojoso d'Este, one of the most beautiful and sought-after women in Lombardy. Soon a great tenderness developed between the lady and the mariner. Through the old and benevolent Ximénez, Barbarina even gave Alessandro an engraved portrait of herself. But the relationship went no further. Possibly a kind of vital exhaustion, or perhaps a revulsion from difficult situations, had taken hold of the once intrepid officer. We know that he wanted to avoid temptation and to curtail his stays in Milan. To Ximénez, who in his silent indulgence had understood everything, he wrote:

I will listen to the details of your first conversation with the Marquise Barbarina with great pleasure. I would not like to lose her friendship or the good impression she has of me, but neither would I like to squander what few days I have left to live by putting myself on a dead-end street.

But the year 1806 was darkened by the news from Spain. The Royal Navy had suffered a cruel defeat at Trafalgar the year before. In this battle Cosme Damián Churruca and Dionisio Alcalá Galiano had lost their lives, and soon afterward Federico Gravina died from wounds received in the battle. A few months earlier, Malaspina had written to Ximénez, "This summer will not pass without a sea battle which I foresee as extremely bloody." For Alessandro these men were parts of his torn past which was now inexorably gone. He tried to recover, planning new trips to Genoa, to Benevento, where his sister Metilda lived, to Naples, and even to Paris, but in fact after that year he only went a few times to Florence.

In that city, however, on January 1, 1807, he had the pleasure of being received at court by María Luisa of Etruria. Surely the old Spanish officer must have taken such an

event as a sign that his tribulations were diminishing. Indeed, the daughter of Charles IV would never have received him if she had felt that the gesture would displease Spain.

Malaspina was also attracted by the intellectual climate of Florence. He established friendships with quite a few dignitaries, among whom were Giulio Cesare Tassoni Estense, minister of the Kingdom of Italy in Florence, and Lazzaro Brunetti, future minister of the Empire in Madrid and a repository of valuable confidences. They were both members of the Colombaria Academy, which Malaspina joined on January 21, 1807. Its president was Scipione de' Ricci, the old Jansenist bishop who had shared a prison cell with Azzo Giacinto in 1800. Unfortunately, the destruction of this Academy's archives in World War II prevents us from finding out if the mariner had presented a paper at this learned academy. It seems likely that he did, since after his death the members felt obliged to appoint one of their number to compose a proper "historical eulogy." Obviously Alessandro had left a favourable and vivid memory of himself.

Under the sponsorship of the Lunigianese poet Giovanni Fantoni, Malaspina also joined the Alpi Apuane Academy in the town of Massa. Here he was appointed supervisor of the section titled "Navigation," but we do not know if this post required any activities or was only honorific.

The years of the great scientific expedition to the Americas seemed very remote now. In Spain perhaps only José Espinosa and Felipe Bauzá continued to use the expedition's materials, to draw maps, but in other parts of the world the memory of this enterprise was kept alive. During these years Baron Pavel Stroganoff, Russia's ambassador to Spain, somehow managed to obtain a copy of the narrative of the voyage from the Hydrographic Repository, and presented it to Tsar Alexander. It was the same text that would be published a few years later by Admiral Krusenstern in the Journal of the Russian Admiralty.

Alessandro's fatigue increased as the delays and judicial obstacles in the legal dispute with his brother escalated. But he realized that his lawyers lacked the necessary clarity of expression, and thus used to prepare his own depositions. The grateful lawyers simply copied them and presented them to the court as their own.

There are very few documents that survive to shed light on the final three years of the navigator's life. We know that he remained nearly all of the time in Pontremoli, where he lived a quiet life. From time to time he surfaced for an outing by carriage to the country home of his cousin, Carlo Emanuele di Fosdinovo, and there was no shortage of hearthside chats with his most devoted friends.

In the meantime the *Memorias* in astronomy by Espinosa y Tello were published in Spain. On this occasion, contrary to what had happened earlier, when accounts of the two schooners' voyage to the Strait of Juan de Fuca were published, the name of Malaspina appeared from time to time. But we do not know if the old officer was aware of the publication. He was no longer receiving mail from Spain because the war had intensified and there was no reason to believe that conditions would improve. Soon after his return to Italy he wrote, referring to Spain, that "the situation of this unfortunate country makes one sob and shudder." And in relation to the prospects for Fabio Ala Ponzzone, who still remained in Mexico, he wrote, "God pray that he may be happily returned to us before the misfortunes which already inundate South America also wash over North America."

Toward the end of that year the first manifestations of the disease that killed him appeared. Alessandro was confined to his bed by February 1810 and was attended by his friend Jacopo Barbieri, the physician of Pontremoli, who was certain that the problem was an intestinal tumour. Of course, there was no effective cure for this illness.

On February 7, 1810, Alessandro called his barrister, Molossi, and dictated a new will in which he named his niece Teresa, the daughter of his sister Metilda, as major heir. In addition, he left special bequests to his main servant Vincenzo Bianchi, to the scullery servant Antonio Franchini, and to Luigi Lorenzelli, for many years the devoted administrator of his properties. Nor did he forget his brother Luigi, who, in case of indigence, was to be given enough funds to maintain a dignified life in Mulazzo. As executors he appointed Carlo Bologna, Giovanni Pizzati and Carlo Parasacchi, all from Pontremoli.

A week before the end, when his hand could no longer even hold a pen, Malaspina dictated an addendum to the will. It stated that Luigi should be given a modest sum to repay his debts on condition that he provide a clear account of the family assets and liabilities. We do not know if this sum was enough to shake Luigi from his torpor, but the incident illustrates the extent to which Alessandro continued to seek precision right up to his final moments.

Perhaps some friend sought to console him so that he would not feel too sad about human misery, but the dying man had not lost his inner serenity. He is supposed to have said, "Human unpleasantness has never upset me."

Alessandro expired in the evening of April 9, 1810,⁶ after receiving extreme unction. There are those who have interpreted his receiving the sacraments as proof of his progressive alienation from the rational principles of his youth, as well as a rejection of the Masonic ideals which he had in all probability followed. We disagree with such a thesis. The truth is that Alessandro had always been a Deist. He had always believed that the universe had been created and was ruled by the will of a Supreme Being. And since 1795 he believed that this Supreme Being coincided with the God of his forebears' religion. He had been explicitly opposed to repetitive and hypocritical devotional practices, but not against religion per se. Without doubt, the humility and genuine kindness of the Capuchin friar Domenico Vincenzo da Parma must have made this final moment sweet, since he was aware that Malaspina had been distancing himself from the world and its travails.

That night the friar, the physician Jacopo Barbieri, his friend Antonio Ricci and his manservant Bianchi gathered around his bed, which was covered by a red canopy. When the doctor performed an autopsy he found a large tumour in the intestine, which confirmed his diagnosis. The friar, who had attended the navigator in his final agony, gave a deeply felt eulogy in the cathedral, and Alessandro's mortal remains were buried in the cemetery of Pontremoli.

The remembrance of Malaspina remained alive among his Pontremoli friends and among the cultivated men he had known in Milan and Florence. Among these people several soon decided to write his obituary. The first to undertake such a project were his

⁶ There are dozens of documents confirming this date. Many of the world's leading libraries, including the Library of Congress, incorrectly report 1809 as the year of Malaspina's death.

executors, who began to gather the relevant documents. They might have completed the project if Carlo Bologna and Pizzatti had not quarrelled over an altogether different matter. The result was that neither one would turn over the letters he had, and nothing was accomplished. The same thing happened in Milan, where the Countess Melzi, wife of Pietro Verri, considered such a project and then abandoned it.

In Florence, the members of the Colombaria Academy put the Escolapian father, Massimiliano Ricca, in charge of producing a “historical eulogy” of the mariner. He was the only one who actually set to work. The priest managed to acquire material from quite a few of Malaspina’s friends—Felipe Bauzá, Juan Andrés, Lazzaro Brunetti and Alessandro Belmonti, among others. In the next thirty years he managed to gather quite a bit of documentation, but he had not yet written a single line. Soon he too died and before long it was rumoured that the materials had been scattered. It took another hundred and fifty years for the valuable bundle to be rediscovered intact.

As for Malaspina’s tomb, by the middle of the 19th century there was not a trace of it left. The cemetery had expanded and no relative or friend had taken the necessary steps to save the navigator’s remains.

Perhaps that is when the legend of Malaspina’s curse began. According to the legend, the adversity which had persecuted, embittered and disenchanting him while he was alive attacked his mortal remains, his writings and the documents dealing with him after his death. Not only that, but the curse pursued his friends and the scholars who attempted to write the saga of his misfortunes.

Nowadays, in the cemetery of Pontremoli an unadorned plaque reminds visitors that there, among the remains of many unknown men, also lie the bones of a great mariner. Even this text seems to allude to the legend of the curse.

Be that as it may, the legend has not dispelled the profound fascination that the memory of the navigator still holds. It is, in fact, a legend to which less and less attention is being paid. Indeed, studies of Alessandro Malaspina are appearing in greater number and with greater depth all the time.

Today there are three institutions that are devoted to the figure, the works and the thinking of Alessandro Malaspina. In Mulazzo, for the last ten years there has been the Centro di Studi Malaspiniani “*Alessandro Malaspina.*”⁷ In Nanaimo, British Columbia,

⁷ The Centro di Studi Malaspiniani was established by the Municipality of Mulazzo in 1987, and received a notable infusion of energy in 1992 when the author of this biography, Dario Manfredi, became its director. The Centro, which occupies an entire floor of the palace built by the Marquises of Malaspina in the 16th century, houses the “*Archivo Domestico dei Malaspina di Mulazzo,*” which contains more than ten thousand documents from the 15th to the 19th centuries, among which are many manuscripts of Alessandro relating in particular to his last years in Italy. We find there too a part of the archive of Fabio Ala Ponzone, who, it will be recalled, was an officer on the famous expedition; this archive also holds letters of other companions from the voyage. In addition, the Centro houses a small but select library of 8,000 items – books, pamphlets, reprints, etc. – about Lunigiana, Modern Italian History, Scientific Explorations, Hispanics and America. About Alessandro, his expedition and his times, there are more than 1200 titles, comprising books, essays, reviews, journals, etc. All of these materials have been gathered thanks to the generosity of many friends and institutions from many countries. Among these the Spanish Ministry of External Affairs stands out.



Figure 23. *The Malaspina castle in Fosdinovo, with the gulf of La Spezia below.* Drawing by J. Hughes, engraving by Aubert, 1849. These lands belonging to the Malaspina family, on which Alessandro grew up, remained always in his memory. An Italian in Spain or “a Spaniard in Italy”: that was his dilemma.

the Alexandro Malaspina Research Centre has been opened. And finally, the Malaspina Foundation is being put into place.

It would be superfluous to emphasize that these institutions are collaborating in a friendly spirit, and will continue to do so. That may be the most fruitful legacy of Alessandro Malaspina’s thinking. This book constitutes the first concrete result of this friendly cooperation. This positive development allows us to assert that history will soon render full justice to his name.

Quod est in votis