

DISINFECTED LETTERS.

Adapted and translated from "La Settimana Filatelica" by

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In our times no one is at all surprised to see that many countries demand a vaccination certificate from travellers who reach their frontiers, be they tourists, immigrants or even only in transit; and no one would ever dream of evading the duty of immunizing oneself against small-pox, typhus, cholera or yellow fever when undertaking an international voyage. On the other hand the World Health Organization carefully insists on the strict adherence of this measure in the interests of the health of the nations. The risk of contamination from one country to another is real and it is in the best interests of individuals as well as that of populations to protect themselves from such a danger, which in the course of past centuries assumed proportions of a veritable national calamity.

Let us for a moment go back to, say, the last two centuries and we shall undoubtedly find that the history of these times has some very dark pages dealing with the frightful and deadly epidemics of plague, cholera, small-pox and other infectious diseases which during these times afflicted humanity to a very great extent. In those days Medicine was still in its infancy and prophylaxis — preventive treatment — was totally unknown to man. The treatment of infectious diseases was yet unknown and immunization was impracticable and one or two cases were enough to start off an epidemic of unpredictable magnitude which could easily be responsible for the dissemination of these infectious diseases throughout entire towns and even provinces.

We find that epidemics of plague raged in Montpellier in 1629 and in Marseilles the Great Plague of 1720 was propagated by a ship which had arrived from the East. The cities of Messina in Sicily and Lisbon were hit in 1753 and 1754 respectively. Thirty years later an epidemic of plague in North Africa was responsible for the death of 250 persons a day. In 1804 Malaga was struck by an epidemic of yellow-fever and another epidemic of this disease in 1821 decimated the population of the Mediterranean littoral.

Very scarce evidence is at our disposal about the epidemics which struck many overseas countries during the 16th and 17th centuries but it is known that from such times sanitary organizations united their efforts with the common scope of limiting these dreaded scourges.

Every harbour which had connections with the Middle East provided a locality for isolation, if not a hospital, wherein passengers, crews and merchandise suspected of being carriers of the virus had to go into quarantine. These precautionary measures, which were supposed to last for forty days and during which appropriate treatment — or at least as such considered —

were applied, lasted in reality often longer. If on board a ship a case of plague had been discovered she immediately went into quarantine for eighty days. The fear of contagious disease being imported from Turkey or from countries under her domain was so great that practically every ship arriving from Turkish ports had to undergo this strict sanitary measure.

Yet another method of control was established. This was what was known as the "certificate of health." Before leaving for a European port every captain of a ship had to obtain a sort of sanitary release known as "certificate" which was granted by the consular authorities.

On being in possession of a "clear certificate", indicating that no contagious disease was prevalent in the country from which the ship had arrived, passengers and merchandise were allowed to come down without any formality. If on the other hand, the captain could not produce to the satisfaction of the authorities of the port of destination but a "certificate of suspicion" (which meant that the country from which the ship had arrived was suspected of having cases of infectious disease amongst its population) the ship was immediately placed in quarantine.

During the latter centuries the Sanitary Authorities became deeply concerned by the arrival of the mail. Although at the time the existence of bacilli was still unknown, yet it had already been assumed that letters could be good carriers of contagious disease. In some instances the Authorities went so far as to stop altogether the circulation of letters. Later it had been decided to disinfect the flaps or as it was then called to purify them. In order to be in a position to do this without opening the letters, incisions or holes were made in the letters with the help of a gadget, invented by the Austrians, called "rastel." The letters so treated were exposed to the fumes of cannon powder. Starting from the 18th Century vinegar baths and chlorine or sulphuric acid vapours were generally used for disinfection and on letters treated in this way, a cachet attesting that the letters had been purified, was applied.

Various types of cachets were used in different ports. In Marseilles a cachet "Purifie Lazaret Marseille" and "Purifiee a Marseille" was used; while at Toulon, which at that time was an important base in the campaign for the conquest of Algeria, an oval as well as a linear cachet "Purifiee a Toulon" was used. The Atlantic ports purified letters too, but some of them did not apply any cachet at all and the only means of knowing that a letter had undergone such precautionary treatment was solely by the razor cuts it had in the flaps.

Malta, of course was no exception, and letters were treated in a similar way by the then sanitary authorities. On account of its geographical position, Malta constituted in some way a bridge between the Ottoman empire and the western Mediterranean countries. In fact she played the important rôle of a platform of the Mediterranean. Ships returning both from Alexandria as well as from the East stopped at Malta before reaching the Italian and French

ports. The cachets applied in Malta were in the shape of small round circles. A cachet of sealing wax, indicating the opening and closing of a letter, is also known, but such cachets are rare as they were generally broken by the recipient.

Some letters dispatched from the East to the U.S.A. were first disinfected at the Greek lazaretto of Ciro's and again re-disinfected at Malta whose authorities had not enough faith in their Greek counterpart, it seems.

In addition, practically all the Italian ports and some cities too, including the Papal States, treated letters in a similar way to avoid their being a possible cause of the spread of contagious disease.

The relative scarcity of these disinfected letters is obvious enough in that recipients of such letters undoubtedly preferred, after having noted the contents, to proceed with their destruction and thus calm their minds against the possible risk of contagion.

In our times all isolation hospitals proceed to disinfect letters sent by their inmates, surely by more effective and safe measures, but these no longer bear any cachets or other evidence of such disinfection. Thus this page in the history of disinfected mail, a subject which has interested and been deeply studied by some philatelic specialists, is now closed.

DIPLOMA OF HONOUR FOR MALTA STAMPS.

On the 7th September, 1962, a set of four stamps was issued to commemorate the Great Siege.

The World Union of Christian Philately St. Gabriel awarded its Diploma of Honour to the Malta Postal Administration for the issue of one of the Great Siege stamps, namely the 2d, value depicting the Madonna of Damascena. This Diploma is only awarded to those postal administrations which issue stamps bearing Christian motifs of an artistic presentation of very good taste and which afford all philatelists the possibility of obtaining the stamps at a value which is within the reach of the general public.

In 1530 the Holy Icon was brought to Malta with other treasures of the Order of the Knights of St. and it was placed in the Church of St. Catherine at Vittoriosa where it remained until 1578 when it was solemnly carried to the Greek Church built in its honour in Valletta. Abundant restorations have completely transformed the image, which was solemnly crowned in 1931 by Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, later a Sovereign Pontiff of the Catholic Church during the years 1939/1958.

(Condensed by J.D. Hamilton from "Malta Review," August, 1963).