

# FACETS ON MEDICAL LIFE IN SENGLEA IN THE LATE 18th AND EARLY 19th CENTURIES

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In 1662 four priests from Senglea founded the Congregation of the Oratorians of St. Philip Neri. They were given the use of a small house together with the oratory and the nearby church of *Marija tal-Portu Salv* which later on became known as the Church of St. Philip. In 1670<sup>1</sup> the priests carried out structural alterations in these buildings. Their successors rebuilt and enlarged them in 1744.

The Oratorians were never a numerous group and by the late 18th century there were only nine of them<sup>2</sup>. An insight into the communal life of these priests is provided by a register of accounts<sup>3</sup> kept by them between 1776 and 30th July 1825. This document records the expenses incurred for: (a) the purchases, from 1792 to 1822, of building materials, hire of boats and carts for the transport of stones, wood, etc and the wages paid to labourers engaged in carrying out structural alterations in houses in Senglea belonging to the Oratorians<sup>4</sup>; (b) the celebrations for the feast of St. Philip Neri and for decorating the church and the altar dedicated to the saint from 1777 to 1820 and for the feast of the Holy Trinity, etc from 1776 to 1809<sup>5</sup>; and (c) for saying Masses for the repose of the souls of deceased individuals between 1781 and 1821<sup>6</sup>.

Apart from these items there are entries — scattered over many folios — of payments related to illnesses of various members of the congregation. It is proposed in this paper to deal with these snippets of medical interest.

## Illnesses

Nine different names of priests are recorded as having been sick during the period 20th February 1777 to 30th July 1825 with a gap between April 1798 and the 10th July 1801. The nature of

their ill-health is not specified except in three instances i.e. *infirmità d'occhi* (eye disease), *medicando il piede* (medicating the foot) and *piaghe dei piedi* (foot ulcers). In other cases the illness is referred to in such generic words as *malattia*, *infirmità* and *indisposizione*.

## Medical personnel

Ten professional men are recorded as having rendered their medical services to the sick priests. In some instances only the surname of the practitioner is recorded but in every case a distinction is made into *medico*, *chirurgo* and *speciale* or *aromatario*. They were:

### Physician (*medico*)

... Xicluna/Scicluna (1788 & 1789)  
... Azzopardi (1820)  
... Dimech (1822)

### Surgeon (*chirurgo*)

Filippo ... (1784)  
*Stanislao Zammut (sic)/Sammut*  
(1805, 1808, 1817 & 1818)  
Francesco Caruana (1822)  
Antonio Muscat (1824)  
Antonino Cassar (1825)

### Pharmacist (*speciale* or *aromatario*)

... Pisani (1788).

These practitioners never reached the highest rungs of the professional hierarchy and their lives influenced but a small circle of people in the restricted ambience of Senglea so much so that a search to identify them and trace their medical activities has not been very rewarding.

A Dr. Francesco Xicluna (Scicluna) was in practice in the late 18th century. After beginning his medical studies in Malta for a year, he went to Naples to continue his medical education graduating from the School of Salerno. He returned to Malta in July 1767 but before being allowed to exercise the

medical profession he had to spend six years practising at the Holy Infirmary of Valletta<sup>7</sup>.

A Dr. Luigi Dimech figures as a party in a lawsuit against a jeweller in April 1838<sup>8</sup> and as the author of a booklet, published in 1868, alleging that the British Consulate in Tunis was in league with the Bey's government "to deprive the numerous creditors (of the Bey), claiming their property, of ultimate justice"<sup>9</sup>.

Antonio Muscat (1777-1847) was practising as assistant surgeon (*chirurgo pratico*) at the age of seventeen years on the galleys of the Order of St. John. During the rising of the Maltese against the French in 1798, he joined the insurgents and was posted to the Ta' Samra Battery serving as surgeon and also as a combatant. In the latter capacity he took part in attacks against the Cottonera Lines and Senglea. At the end of hostilities he was employed as surgeon at the Civil Hospital of Valletta and at the Lazzaretto. Some time after 1811 he obtained the Doctorate in medicine. He was active during the plague of 1813 and later engaged in private practice in the three cities. He served during the cholera epidemic of 1837 and in 1841 was appointed *medico dei poveri* (the equivalent of District Medical Officer) for Bormla<sup>10</sup>.

There were two pharmacists with the Pisani surname in Senglea in the last quarter of the 18th century — Lorenzo, who in 1770 acquired the pharmacy shop of the deceased John Baptist Saliba<sup>11</sup> and who died by 1798; and Francesco, his son, who during the French occupation was accused of involvement in a conspiracy against the French in August 1798. He was tried and acquitted but was later re-arrested and shot on the 19th February 1799 following a search of his pharmacy shop by the French authorities and the

discovery of a sword in the shop at a time when the possession of weapons had been prohibited by the French<sup>12</sup>. It has not been possible to ascertain which of the two Pisanis is referred to in the manuscript.

An apothecary Ignatius Costù had a pharmacy in Senglea as shown by his signature *Ar. Ignatis Costù della Senglea* on the title-page of the *Farmacopoea* of L. Brugnatelli published in Venice in 1803<sup>13</sup>.

There are entries in the account book of payments to a number of attendants on the sick corresponding to to-day's nurses. These are Francesco Caruana (1786) and Giovanni Farrugia (1825). Others are referred to anonymously as *guardiano* or *assistenza dell'uomo nella malattia* (1820) or *assistenza di due uomini* (1820).

### Fees paid to physicians and surgeons

There is marked variation in the amounts paid as fees probably depending on the number of calls and the nature of treatment applied. The physician, on the whole, received a higher fee than the surgeon. Thus in the case of the former the fee varied from a minimum of 1 *scudo* and 3 *tari* in 1789 to a maximum of 15 *scudi* in 1822; the surgeon's minimum was 10 *tari* in 1784 up to 5 *scudi* in 1818. It is not possible to give their equivalent monetary value to-day owing to changes in currency and in cost of living during the past two hundred years. But as a very rough guide, one *scudo* would correspond to about eight cents; and one *tari* to six mils. By way of comparison it may be noted that the contemporary wage of the cook employed by the Oratorians was eight *scudi* a month.

Presumably the fees charged were in conformity with the tariff laid down by the code of laws promulgated in 1724 by Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena which established a rate of one *tari* for a day visit and four *tari* for a night call.

The prices of medicaments supplied by the pharmacist was fixed by the Chief Government Medical Officer (*Protomedico*). The medical and surgical practitioners and the pharmacist were actually paid at the end of treatment or after the death of the patient<sup>14</sup>.

### Cost of illness

The payments incurred for the various illnesses are not always broken down into professional fees, cost of

medication, etc but are shown globally under such terms as *per la malattia del Padre....* The minimum amount paid was 2 *scudi* and 10 *grani* (1783) and the maximum was .67 *scudi* 10 *tari* and 16 *grani* (1786) to cover a period of treatment of three months.

In some instances payments for the purchase of medicaments are given separately. The lowest amount paid was 8 *tari* (1784) and the highest 18 *scudi* and 1 *tari* (1788).

Under the date 20th April 1780 there is an entry to the effect that 5 *scudi* 15 *grani* were spent for buying a "book in which are noted the expenses of the medicaments and the cost of the illnesses" but this book has not, so far, come to light.

### Medicaments bought

These are often referred to generically as *medicamenti presi* or *purga* (1787) except for a few items distinguished by their names:

- Reobarbaro* (1788)
- Olio di mandorla dolce* (1792)
- Acqua rosacea* (1822)

- Camomilla* (1822)
- Spirito salmioniaco* (1824)
- Unguento rosato* (1824)

Rhubarb, in the form of an infusion or of syrup, was prescribed as a purgative; Sweet Almond Oil was given as a mild aperient and as a cough mixture; Rose Water was prepared from the petals of *Rosa Centifolia* and taken as an astringent; chamomile was an infusion of the flowers of *Artemis nobilis* and given as a febrifuge and for the relief of flatulence; *Spiritus ammoniac aromaticus* was a mixture of carbonate of ammonia and Oil of Nutmeg employed as a sudorific and expectorant; Ointment of Roses was a compound of crushed rose petals and fat for the dressing of ulcers<sup>15</sup>.

### Dietary regimen

This consisted in the administration of *siero* or whey (1784), *latte asinino* (asses' milk) (1804 and 1817), *latte di capra* (goats' milk) (1825), *galline* (chicken) (1825), *carne di vacca* (beef) (1825) and *vino di Malaga* (Malaga wine) (1825) which contained up to



16% of absolute alcohol by volume.

The *siero* or whey is the watery part of milk that remains when the rest forms curds. It was recommended in lung diseases. Asses' milk, being "lighter" than that of the goat and the cow, was prescribed for patients who could not "digest" the other types of milk<sup>16</sup>.

### The plague of 1813

The story of epidemiology in the Maltese Islands during the 19th century revolves mainly around the plague of 1813 and the outbreaks of cholera of 1837, 1850, 1865 and 1887.

The appearance of plague caused a major disruption of the public health and of the economy of the Maltese Islands from early April 1813 to the beginning of September 1814. There was widespread mortality in spite of the sanitary measures enforced by the government. Senglea, however, claimed to have enjoyed a total exemption from the disease though this has been disputed<sup>17</sup>. This may be due to the fact that nowhere were the quarantine laws so scrupulously observed as in Senglea<sup>18</sup>. This freedom from plague may be the reason why the *Esili* register makes no allusion to the epidemic though it has been stated that

the Convent of St. Philip Neri was prepared as a temporary hospital for patients from the three cities<sup>19</sup>. There is an indirect reference to the plague in another of the Oratorians' manuscripts<sup>20</sup> to the effect that the High Masses that were due to be celebrated monthly at the altar of the *Santissimo Bambino* were not said from May to August as the Bishop had prohibited the people from gathering in churches with the aim of preventing the spread of the "contagion" of plague. These Masses founded by the Baroness Maria Depiro, were eventually celebrated in September.

### The cholera of 1837

During the cholera epidemic of 1837 not only the convent but also the church were used as hospitals as is recorded in another register of *Memorie*<sup>21</sup>.

Cholera broke out on the 9th June 1837 at the *Ospizio*, the old people's home, at Floriana spreading thence to other parts of Malta. Temporary hospitals were established in Valletta and in some of the villages and towns including Senglea<sup>22</sup>.

The Oratorian chronicler wrote thus on the 20th June 1837: (Translation)

"At a quarter to two in the afternoon, the page (*paggio*) of His Excellency Monsignor Bishop (Francesco Saverio Caruana) brought me a letter with the information that His Excellency Sir Henry Frederick Bouverie, our Governor, had found it necessary to use our oratory as a hospital for those stricken with the current illness of cholera; for this reason the Bishop asked me to make arrangements without any delay to prepare the oratory for this purpose but (directed me) to retain the church and the library in my custody. Accordingly I immediately began to make the necessary preparations by placing the furnishings and other objects of the oratory in the basement corridor and keeping them under lock and key. The sacred pictures were removed to the pantry and the library. The first patient to be received was a woman from Vittoriosa who died on the same day. Other patients were brought from the same town, Cospicua and Senglea<sup>23</sup>. On the 5th July the Fiscal (legal official) of the Bishop arrived at half-past nine in the morning with an order to evacuate the church completely because the government wanted to turn it into a hospital as the oratory proved to be too small; and to place the church furnishings in the



sacristy and to transfer the Blessed Sacrament to the Oratory. As soon as I began, with the help of a few men, to remove the furnishings, pictures, statues, etc., the church was filled with people who refused to have the church surrendered for the new purpose; in fact as soon as they saw me preparing to transfer the Blessed Sacrament to the Oratory many of them advanced towards me and not only restrained me but took away from me the key of the tabernacle. I went to the sacristy and stayed there trembling with fear at the sight of the tumult. In the meanwhile some of them ascended the church-steeple and started ringing the bells. As soon as I heard the sound of the bells I went to stop the ringing and sent various persons and the sacristan to bring down everyone from the belfry and lock its door securely as was in fact done. The people refused to leave the church and replaced everything that had been already removed by me. At last after many entreaties and pleadings we succeeded in clearing the people from the church and closing it after promising them that we would see the Governor about the matter. The lawyer (blank) went along with others to see the Governor but did not find him.

At 2 p.m. the Principal Intendent of the Police, Mr. Galland (?) arrived with a large troop of soldiers. They were posted around the church and oratory and in *Strada Reale* to ensure that the order issued in the morning was carried out. The Intendent asked me to explain to the people, in the Maltese language, that the church was being taken over for the public good but he told me not to refer to the Governor but to say that the church was being taken over by order of the Bishop. Following this (speech) we again cleared the church of its furnishings, statues, pictures of the *Via Crucis*, etc., and I removed the Blessed Sacrament to the oratory. The sick were transferred to the church and the soldiers were placed on guard on the parvis.

It was rumoured that if the people had attempted a riot the soldiers had been given order to shoot and even a cannon at (Fort) Sant' Angelo would have been brought into action. Thank God that no one attempted to ring the bells of the Parish Church (of Our Lady of Victories); fortunately the Arch-priest was warned in time and he locked the door leading to the bell-tower.

Mass was celebrated in the oratory

with recitation of the lityny and benediction with the Blessed Sacrament; facilities were provided for the hearing of daily confessions for the convenience of the people but more than one thousand persons failed to attend Mass on feast days because they had been deprived of their church, because of the fear (of catching the disease) or because of other reasons.

On the following day, two Capuchin friars came at the instance of the Bishop to administer the Sacraments and assist the sick in the hospital after the death from cholera of the Rev. Vincenzo Pisani who had been giving spiritual assistance to the patients<sup>23,24</sup>.

After reaching its peak in July, the epidemic started to wane in August and

ceased completely by the 11th October<sup>25</sup>. On the 28th of August the few patients that were still receiving treatment in the church were removed to "a spacious building situated in an airy spot" at Floriana<sup>26</sup>. During the period that the hospital was open, from the 20th June to the 2nd September, it received 685 patients of whom 350 died, 329 recovered and 6 were transferred to the Valletta hospital<sup>27</sup>.

The library, the Main Hall (*sala*) and the sacristy remained in the hands of the Oratorian community during the whole time that the church was used as a hospital<sup>28</sup>, but there is evidence that accommodation for patients was provided in another part of the convent besides the church and the oratory for



by early November 1837 the Oratorians incurred an expenditure of one *scudo*, one *tari* and eight *grani* for white-washing "the three rooms below the sacristy where several persons had died of cholera"<sup>29</sup>.

The church and oratory were opened for public worship with a religious function at the end of which the celebrants were entertained to "refreshments and *rosolio*"<sup>30</sup>. On the 21st October a solemn Mass *de requiem* was said by order of the Bishop in the four cities and at the Cathedral for the repose of the souls of those who died during the epidemic. The same was done on the 27th in the parish churches of the countryside. In the following days a solemn Mass of thanksgiving with singing of the *Te Deum* was celebrated in the Cathedral and in all parish churches<sup>31</sup>. The last religious function at the Church of St. Philip Neri in connection with the cholera epidemic took place on the 1st January 1838 when High Mass was said in honour of the Virgin Mary of Porto Salvò in fulfilment of a vow, made during the epidemic, for deliverance from the disease<sup>32</sup>.

### Cholera epidemic of 1850

The role played by the Oratorian community in a further cholera epidemic that struck the island on the 9th June 1850 was a purely religious one. In fact according to *Il portafoglio maltese*<sup>33</sup>, the government intended to set up a hospital for cholera patients in Senglea but this plan was met "with every imaginable opposition". The priests at the Convent of St. Philip Neri "did not want to surrender their place for this purpose". Another refusal came from the owner of the building housing the Government Primary School who made a formal protest to government against the latter's intention to establish a hospital in that school.

In late July a circular from the Bishop entreated the people to pray to the Holy Virgin, on the eve of the feast of the Annunciation, to deliver them from their calamity. On the 23rd July the statues of the Immaculate Conception and of St. Philip Neri were exposed to public veneration at the church of Porto Salvo. The people responded by crowding the church for the recitation of the litany and benediction and by lighting numerous candles before the above-named statues<sup>34</sup>.

Public spirited individuals organised Soup Kitchens to feed the indigent<sup>35</sup>. On the 6th August, the committee

charged with this task in Senglea asked the Oratorians to allow them the use of their kitchen to cook the meat and the soup. This request was granted and the distribution of this relief continued to be issued until the 30th September<sup>36</sup>.

On the 23rd August the Bishop ordered the celebration of a requiem Mass for the repose of the souls of those who were dying of cholera. At the same time he recommended to parish priests and other members of the clergy to warn the people "to abstain from the consumption of noxious foods especially fruits" — which in those days were believed to be the cause of cholera.

From this point in time onwards, the archives of the Oratorians remain silent concerning the events of the epidemic which came to an end on the 13th October with 1736 reported deaths in Malta and Gozo<sup>37</sup>.

There were two other major cholera epidemics in the Maltese Islands — in 1865 and in 1887 — in which Senglea was involved (99 cases and 17 cases respectively) but no records from the Oratorians have so far been met with regarding these two outbreaks<sup>38</sup>.

Admittedly, these glimpses brief and incomplete as they are into the morbidity of a small religious community and into the behaviour of the people of Senglea when faced with medical emergencies, both individual and collective, do not reflect stirring events; yet they are none the less worthy of consideration. Indeed though these episodes just flit across the folios of the archives of the Oratorians, they never the less provide evidence of the concern of each passing day during the time of illness with its emotional, financial, social and religious overtones. They are also welcome because, apart from the patina given them by time, they resurrect, albeit in a minor key, various facets of the medical life of Senglea in the late 18th and the early half of the 19th centuries which would otherwise have remained unknown to the present generation. One hopes that further sources of information will come to light as other manuscripts dealing with the *historia domus* of the Oratorians are unearthed.

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### References

1. At about this time the population of Senglea was 4111 souls (1694). Between 1736 and 40 it had increased to 4896. Bonnici, A. *L'Isola fi grajjet il-Bazilika-Santwarju ta' Marija Bambina*, Malta, 1986, Vol. 2, p. 156; Cutajar, D. & Cassar, C. *Malta's Role in Mediterranean Affairs 1530-1699*, Mid-Med Bank Ltd., Report & Accounts 1984, Malta, 1985, p. 61.
2. The founder was Dun Xmun Schembri who died on August 12, 1723 at 89 years of age. Bonnici, A., op., cit., Vol. 2, pp. 156 and 375; 76-83, 108, 260, 280, 340, 372 & 373; Vol. 1 (1981), pp. 95 & 166.
3. *Esiti*. 1776-1825. The front and back covers and the spine are missing as are also the fly leaf, titlepage and folios 1 to 6. There are many blank folios. Some of the leaves are uniformly stained brown suggesting exposure to some substance (vinegar?) presumably for disinfecting purposes. The fear of catching the "contagion" of plague, etc., from handling paper was prevalent in the 18th century. It had not disappeared by 1834 so much so that letters reaching Malta from Gibraltar during the cholera epidemic of that year at the Rock were steeped in vinegar for disinfection before delivery by the Post Office in Malta to their recipients. Vide Cassar, P. *The Correspondence of a Senglea Merchant During the Plague of 1813*, *Hyphen*, 1980, Vol. 2, No. 4, p. 154.
4. *Esiti*, fols. 7 & 30t.
5. *Ibidem*, fols. 50-53, 100-103, 164 & 165t.
6. *Ibidem*, fol. 140.
7. Archives 1911, fol. 93, National Malta Library (NML).
8. *Malta Government Gazette* 4th April 1838, p. 134 and 18th April 1838, p. 155.
9. Dimech, L. *The British Consulate in Tunis. Critical Remarks*. Malta, 1868, p. 87.
10. *Il mediterraneo*, 26th May 1847, p. 12.
11. Cassar, P. *Pharmacists and Politics in Malta in the 18th and 19th Centuries*, *The St. Luke's Hospital Gazette*, 1970, Vol. 5, p. 37.
12. Cassar, P. op., cit., p. 37; Testa, C. *Maz-Zewg Nahat tas-Swear*, Malta, 1979, Vol. 1, pp. 206-10 and Vol. 2, 1980, pp. 443, 446 and 471.
13. In the author's library.
14. Cassar, P. A Note on the Economics of Medical Practice in 18th Century Malta, *The St. Luke's Hospital Gazette*, 1974, Vol. 9, p. 166. By way of comparison it may be noted that at this point in time the wage of the cook of the Oratorians was 8 *scudi* a month. Vide Bonnici, A. op., cit., Vol. 2, p. 304.
15. Orosi, G. *Farmacologia teorica e pratica or farmacia italiana*, Livorno, 1849, pp. 83, 130, 331, 357-60 and 477; Squire, P. *Companion to the Latest Edition of the British Pharmacopoeia*, London, 1882, pp. 39 & 43.
16. Orosi, G. op., cit., pp. 297-301.
17. *Malta Government Gazette* 8th December 1813, p. 25.
18. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, p. 186.
19. Borg, T. *Malta u l-gwaj tal-pest*, Malta, no date, p. 16.
20. *Libro messe 1768-1825*, fols. 269 and 276.
21. *Memorie diverse della Chiesa dell'Oratorio di San* Cont. on page 27

## FACETS OF MEDICAL LIFE

(cont. from page 18)

*Filippo Senglea dal 1831 al 31 Dic. 1845*, Vol. 2.

22. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, pp. 192-6.
23. *Memorie diverse ecc.* fol. 43 et seq.
24. *Ibidem*, fol. 46.
25. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, pp. 197-8.
26. *Malta Government Gazette*, 21st June 1837, p. 220; 28th June, p. 233; 5th July, p. 237; 12th July, p. 247; 19th July, p. 260; 26th July, p. 268; 9th August, p. 283; 16th August p. 295; 23rd August, p. 304; 30th August, p. 312; 6th September, p. 320.
27. *Ibidem*, p. 320.
28. *Della chiesa dell'Oratorio, Luglio 1837 - 5 Gennaio 1854*, fol. 109. A number of the first folios are missing.
29. *Ibidem*, fol. 112.
30. *Memorie diverse ecc.*, fol. 47. A drink made of alcohol, water, sugar and an essence of menta or vanilla.
31. *Ibidem*, fols. 47 & 48.
32. *Ibidem*, fol. 54.
33. *Il portafoglio maltese*, 1st August 1850, p. 5617.
34. *Memorie diverse ecc.*, fols. 320 and 321.
35. Cassar, P. *Medical History of Malta*, London, 1965, p. 200.
36. The committee was composed of Padre Paolo Lebrun, Francesco Bonello and Guglielmo Castaldo (sic). *Il portafoglio maltese*, 8th August 1850, p. 5624.
37. Pisani, S.L. *Report on the Cholera Epidemic in the Year 1887*, Malta, 1888, p. 10.
38. *Ibidem*, pp. 4 & 15. Sutherland, J. *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of Malta and Gozo with reference to the Epidemic Cholera in the Year 1865*, London, 1887, p. 8.