

Disinfection


Part 3

By Dr. A. Bonnici



PER PARTE, ET COMANDAMENTO
Delli Illustrissimi, & Eccellentissimi Signori li Signori An-
tiani, & Gonfaloniero di Giustizia, & Signori Confer-
uatori di Sanità dell'Eccellentissima Republica
di Lucca, si fa Bandire, e pubblicamente
notificare,



Valmente detti Eccellentissimi Signori, & Si-
gnori Conferuatori, hanno aggiunto alli Ban-
di già publicati della suspensione dal commer-
cio di altri luoghi la Città, & Isola di Malta, 
à loro beneplacito, sotto quelle pene, & proi-
bitioni apposte nell'altri Bandi publicati in queste ma-
terie. Si che, &c.

Dat. ex Palatio die 19. Nouemb. 1655.

Geruzimo Lippi Coad.

Publicato da me Carlo Puccini Publico Banditore il dì sopradetto .

In LVCCA, Per Incinto Paci, &c. M.DC.LV.

There have been several references to the Lazaretto by travellers passing through Malta, and the earliest description is to be found in the diary of an Englishman - George Sandys, who in 1610, on his way back to England passed through Malta and was informed by the Port Sanitary Authorities that his quarantine period was forty days, before he had the freedom to visit towns in Malta, or to contact friends. (Quaranta = forty).

However a French Captain intervened on his behalf with the Grand Master "soliciting the Grand Master on my behalf, as he sat in Council who with the assent of the Great Crosses granted me Pratick". (1) and so Sandys the next morning was free. This was indeed an exceptional case, and Sandys was a very lucky man to escape quarantine in this manner, as the Government of the Order knowing through experience, the heavy death rate, the disruption to trade, with consequent enormous harm to the economy, and a threat to starvation, whenever there was plague in Malta, came to pin its faith more and more on the isolation of travellers entering the island.

Notwithstanding this precaution, plague continued to visit the Island. An outbreak of plague originated in Kalkara Creek in 1655, but fortunately starvation was averted.

The worst outbreak occurred in 1676. Ten thousand inhabitants perished including several knights. As a consequence all trade and connections with Sicily were again suspended and the island was isolated for several months. Several Italian - City States published Official Notes similar to the ones reproduced in the magazine, issued in Bologna on the 24th April 1676 suspending trade with Malta and in Lucca in 1655.

No wonder that heavy penalties were contemplated against infringement of the quarantine regulations, which included fines, imprisonment, corporal punishment, penal servitude on the galleons of the Order, and even death by hanging or by other means. "Perdere la vita irremissibilmente in una forca o sia punito colla pena dell' ultimo supplicio". (3)

In Medical History of Malta by Dr. Paul Cassar we find: "No regard was paid to personal liberty, property or international commerce once there was the possibility that disease, especially plague, could be introduced into the Island. In October 1744 plague was raging in Messina and, in order to prevent anyone from descending in Malta from that port, strong guards were posted round the shores of the Island. All sailors on the ships already in harbour were ordered to remain on board as an additional precaution. One English sailor, however, insisted on going ashore in defiance of this order and he was shot dead by the sentinel on guard. (4) Passengers absconding from the quarantine establishment were not unknown. The escapees, in their endeavour to avoid capture by the police took refuge inside the Church where the civil authorities had no jurisdiction, as the churches then enjoyed the privilege of sanctuary. To discourage these escapees from the Lazaretto the privilege of sanctuary for persons trying to evade quarantine was abolished in 1749. (5)

In November 1748 seven corpses were found on the coast of Gozo following the shipwreck of a foreign vessel on the shores. Gozo was put in quarantine by the Maltese Sanitary Authorities and letters from Gozo to Malta were submitted to disinfection "as if they came from the levant or from some

SOSPENSIONE

Di Commercio con la Città, & Isola di Malta.

Publicato in Bologna li 24. Aprile 1676.



Nuigilando l' Eminentiss. e Reuerendiss. Sig. Cardinal Buonaccorsi Legato di Bologna alla Conseruatione della publica salute di questa Città, e Legatione: Et hauendo l'Eminenza Sua sicuri rincontri, che il Contagio si faccia sentire nella Città, & Isola di Malta. Perciò l'Eminenza Sua col consenso, e partecipazione de gl' Illustrissimi Signori Consaloniero di Giustitia, & Assonti del Reggimento sopra la Sanita, e coll'esempio d'altri Magistrati di Sanità corrispondenti; sospende il Commercio, e pratica con la Città, & Isola tutta di Malta: proibendo espressamente l'ingresso in questa Città, e Legatione delle Persone, Mercanzie, e Robbe, che venissero dalla sudetta Città, & Isola, sotto pena della perdita di dette Mercanzie, e Robbe, & alle persone, che di là venissero, ò altre, che introducessero tali Mercanzie, e Robbe, anche della Vita, secondo la qualità de' casi ad arbitrio di Sua Eminenza. Auuertendo, che contra li Trasgressori si procederà con ogni rigore.

Datum Bononiz die 24. Aprilis 1676.

B. Card. Buonaccorsi Legato.
Marius Cafalis Vex. Iust.

other place suspected of pestilence". (6) Thus no risks were taken even when the possibility of "contagion" was only remote.

Dr. Cassar gives a delightful description of how a plague-infected Venetian ship was dealt with, and the political consequences of such an action.

"In spring of 1781 a plague-infected Venetian ship entered Marsamxetto Harbour, but when it was hailed by the guard on St. Elmo point, and subsequently approached by the boat of the Health Office none of the crew was to be seen.

The ship was boarded by a health guardian of the lazaretto. He found only

one member of the crew on board. This sailor, who was very gravely ill, told the guardian that the rest of the crew had perished of plague and that their corpses had been thrown into the sea. An urgent meeting of the Health Council was summoned by Grandmaster to deliberate on the measures to be taken to safeguard the public health and save the life of the plague-stricken sailor. The Council decided to send two doctors on board the ship one of whom had to be well versed in medicine and surgery. The choice fell on Dr. Stefano Borg. He was granted a liberal remuneration for his work but he was warned that he had to be prepared to sacrifice his own life in the execution of his duty, in which eventuality his family was to be adequately compensated. He was entrusted with the removal of his patient to the lazzaretto when he himself had to remain until the man died or recovered: in either case he was to stay in the lazaretto until he had served a quarantine of eighty days. Borg had the patient plunged, quite naked, into the sea for three consecutive times, and then had him wrapped in a sheet and conveyed to the lazzaretto. There the sick man was given sugared wine and allowed to sleep for three hours after which his hands were incised. We are in the dark as to whether the patient recovered or not but we know that Borg came out of this episode safe and sound and was still alive in 1801.

The fate of the ship did not have such a smooth ending. Three suggestions were put forward by the Council of State with regard to her disposal:

- a) to sink the ship in one of the bays round the coast and to leave it submerged for a certain period of time, until it was purified of its 'contagious miasma' and afterwards to refloat it and return it to her owners.
- b) To disinfect the vessel by opening all apertures to allow a free circulation of air, the whole operation to be carried out by forty or fifty slaves or convicts or
- c) to tow the ship to the open sea and set it on fire under the supervision of a guard of fifty men under the command of a knight to ensure that no one approached the ship or tried to possess himself of any of her cargo that escaped destruction.

This last proposal was approved by the Council and carried into effect with the consent of the Venetian Government. The owners of the merchandise, who were subjects of the Bay of Tunis, claimed compensation for their cargo; but the Order declined to indemnify the merchants on the ground that in destroying the ship with her cargo the Order had only acted "in general interests of humanity". The Bay then turned to Venice but as the Republic also refused to pay compensation he declared war on Venice and in the space of less than a month he had captured fourteen Venetian ships and sold their crews into slavery. The combined fleets of Venice and of Malta were sent to attack Tunis but they were met by such murderous fire from the shore batteries that they were forced to retreat and return to Malta. Eventually, seeing the impossibility of subduing the Bey, Venice consented to pay him the compensation asked for and peace was re-established. (8)

In June 1784 a Maltese vessel suspected of being infected was destroyed by fire with all the goods on board after her crew and passengers were ordered to strip naked and wash themselves in sea water before they were taken ashore to the lazzaretto. (9)

There regulations remained operative throughout the rule of the Knights over Malta.

On the 23rd December, 1782, Grand Mastrer De Rohan appointed a Commission to revive the laws of Malta, and a code of laws for municipal affairs was published in 1784 (10) in which the existing regulations were tightened, others amended and brought up to date, and new ones were introduced to enforce preventive measures. A case in point, was the fouling of harbour waters, or the discharge therein of any material, even with the intention of lifting it again after some time, was made an offence punishable by a heavy fine, and in cases of relapse by seizure of the vessel itself. One third of the fine, or of the sale of the vessel, was to be paid to the informer, if there happened to be one. The Guardians of Health were to be selected and approved by the Grand Master from a list submitted by the Commissioners of Health who first considered the merits of all applicants.

The new Code empowered judges to inflict severe penalties not only for the perpetration of, but also any attempt to commit, quarantine offences, in conformity with the principle "Sola facti veritate inspecta mare militari". (11)

When in 1785 John Howard of the Royal Society of London, the hospital reformer, was making a survey of the Lazarettos of Europe, he came to Malta and described the quarantine measures prevailing at the time (12) by stating:-

MALTA
QUARANTINE. At MALTA there are two kinds of *quarantine* performed: one by ships with clean bills of health, and the other by ships with foul bills. The first, called the petty quarantine, lasts eighteen days, and the ships which perform it lie at the entrance of the port near the health-office. In order to enable the passengers and crews, without producing danger, to buy provisions and converse with their friends, there are enclosures separated by stone posts, with rails and palisades; and two soldiers stationed to prevent any improper communication.

Here, some of the ships from the Morea, and other places, unload their grain. At a little distance there is a church, situated on high ground, and intended for the accommodation of the persons who perform this quarantine. A letter brought by a ship just arrived from Turkey, was, I saw, received with a pair of iron tongs, dipped in vinegar, and then put into a case, and laid for about a quarter of an hour on wire grates, under which straw and perfumes had been burnt: after which the case was opened, and the letter taken out by one of the directors of the office. And this is the usual method of receiving letters here.

LAZARETTO. The other, called the great quarantine, is performed at a *lazaretto* which is situated on a peninsula near the city. On the most elevated part of this peninsula is Fort Manuel: the lazaretto, being on the shore, is less airy. Additions have been made to it at different times. The old part is inconvenient, and too close to admit of a proper ventilation of cottons and other merchandise. It has sixteen rooms on two floors. On the higher floor there are eight, which open into a balcony, and have opposite windows: but all were very dirty.

In the other part of this building there are two courts, with rooms and sheds much more convenient for passengers, and airy for merchandise. Both these courts are one hundred and one feet by sixty-three. Two other buildings and a chapel were just begun; and these erections, when finished, will make the lazaretto capable of allowing a proper separation of the cargoes of six or seven ships on quarantine together.

At the end of the lazaretto there is a large court, with stone troughs for beasts, which often come from the Barbary coast. At the upper part of this court, on a pleasanter rising ground, there are several large and good sheds, with stone mangers, and two or three rooms over them.

There is here a burying ground, where there seemed to have been some recent burials; and also a place for burning the bodies of such as die of the plague.

The greatest care is taken to destroy infection should there be any. Ships with foul bills are required to perform quarantine eighty days: but at the end of forty days they may change their station, and the captains are allowed to come on shore. The different kinds of goods are separated, and placed in proper order under cover. The cottons are taken out of the bags containing them, and placed in rows of piles, upon boards laid on stone pillars about eighteen inches from the floors; and in repacking they are flung over a man who gets into the bags, in order to tread down the cotton; the consequence of which must be exposing him to great danger should any infection remain. This, though the surest way of expelling infection from cotton, is not the most agreeable to merchants, not only because more expensive, but also for the following reason. The bales of cotton, in conveying them on camels to the sea-ports, are often taken off on the roads, and laid in wet and dirty places where their outsidés are injured. In consequence of being taken to pieces and repacked in the lazaretto in the manner now described, the injured parts get among the inner parts, and the cotton acquires the appearance of being wholly damaged; and, therefore, is rendered less marketable.—These are observations which three large English ships performing quarantine while I was here gave me an opportunity of making.

MALTA.

The other part of the building referred to by Howard is the last block of building towards the East. It consists of a row of warehouses built round two centred courtyards on ground floor. On the first floor there are apartments and wards with a portico facing the sea and open spaces for the recreation of contacts and travellers. (13) the old part is that building now called “Il-Palazz” which stands round a very large central courtyard from which an imposing stairway leads to the first floor, which is still used as a hospital for infectious diseases, whilst the ground floor serves as a laundry and house other ancillary services. On the front of the building there was fixed a marble tablet bearing the characteristic and significant warning “Chi Ardisce di Marcare o Guastare le Mura in Lazzaretto Farà Quarantena Doppia”.

1. Sandys G. Sandys Travels; London 1673. p.178. Dr. Paul Cassar Medical History of Malta p.299
2. Pratique Vol. VI No. 4. p.87, 88.
3. Leggi e Costituzioni Prammaticali, Malta 1724.
4. Rebone G., Giornale di successi delle isole di Malta e Gozo. Malta 1939 p.65. Dr. P. Cassar, Medical History of Malta p.287.
5. Manuscripts 429. Bandi 1744-56 fol.97. Royal Malta Library. Dr. P. Cassar, Medical History of Malta, p.287.
6. Rebone G. op. cit. p.106.
7. Dr. Paul Cassar, Medical History of Malta, p.289. Manuscript 183, University fol.32. R.M.L.
8. Doublet P., Memoires historiques sur l'invasion et l'occupation de Malte, Paris 1883. p.73
9. Archives 274. fol. 20, R.M.L.
10. 11. Del Diritto Municipale di Malta, Malta 1784.
12. J. Howard. An account of the Principal Lazarettos in Europe, London 1789.
13. Bussolin G., Delle Istituzioni di Sanità Marittima nel Bacino del Mediterraneo, Trieste 1881.