

PHARMACISTS AND POLITICS IN MALTA IN THE 18th and 19th CENTURIES

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The autocratic rulers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem allowed no overt political activity during the two-and-a-half centuries of their domain over the Maltese Islands. Signs of unrest first occurred in 1560 when a number of citizens met secretly and drew up a petition to Philip II, King of Spain, to whom they appealed to induce Grand Master Jean de la Valette to respect their political rights and privileges among which was the question of the imposition of taxes. The author of the document was, allegedly, Dr. Joseph Callus, the first Maltese physician known to us, who was arrested with his collaborators, condemned to death and hanged (Cassar, 1965).

No other political stirrings on the part of the Maltese came to ruffle the regime of the Knights of St. John until two hundred years later when preparations for a revolt were hatched. On the 31st December 1772 a certain Giuseppe Zahra,

one time teacher of mathematics to the pages of the Grand Master, together with a priest from Floriana, Don Gaetano Mannarino, assembled in the vicinity of the church of St. Publius with four hundred followers. The pretext was that of rendering thanks to the Almighty by Don Gaetano Mannarino for the recovery of his brother from a very grave illness but in reality the intention was to take possession of Valletta. The projected rising was, however, called off at the last moment when the leaders learned that the government had got wind of the whole affair and taken the security measures that the situation called for (Laferla, 1926).

Among the conspirators there were a physician from Valletta, who remains anonymous, and who lived in Floriana but later moved to Birkirkara (Callus, 1961 a); and an apothecary from Floriana, Pasquale Balzan.

We first hear of Pasquale Balzan in

February 1764 when he applied to the Grand Master for permission to run a pharmacy at Floriana under the direction of "an approved and matriculated pharmacist". His request was granted as he had assured the Medical College that he would do so with the assistance and under the direction of the pharmacist Aloisio Cocchi, until he himself had finished his studies and "passed the usual examination" in pharmacy.

Balzan had begun his apprenticeship with the pharmacist Giuseppe Felici at Floriana, then went to continue his studies at Palermo, Naples and Rome where he was examined and awarded the certificate of pharmacist (*privilegio d'aromatario*) by the thirteen pharmacists and three physicians composing the College of Rome, on the 21st June 1766. On his return to Malta in August of the same year he obtained the licence to exercise his profession and keep a pharmacy in Floriana in his own name (Archives 1190 and 1191, RML).

A second attempt at a rebellion was made in 1775. Pasquale Balzan with an unnamed pharmacist from the Holy Infirmary again appears among the followers of Don Gaetano Mannarino during the so-called "Rising of the Priests" who demanded the restoration of national privileges and a reduction in the price of bread. Pasquale Balzan, with a handful of men, succeeded in taking possession of St. James Cavalier in Valletta, while Mannarino with another group of insurgents captured Fort St. Elmo. The uprising was quickly quelled by the Grand Master and Knights of St. John. Pasquale Balzan was arrested and imprisoned in the Castellania (now the office of the Health Department) and charged with high treason, but a legal point cropped up with regard to the court procedures.

Balzan, besides being a pharmacist, was also a cleric. Having received minor orders, he enjoyed ecclesiastical immunity and could not, therefore, be prosecuted by the Civil Tribunals. The Grand Master, however, refused to hand him over to the Episcopal Court for trial and ordered his execution with the other rebels. Balzan was strangled to death in the Castellania, and beheaded. His head was impaled on a

pike on St. James Cavalier on the 13th/14th September 1775 (Callus, 1961 b).

The next political episode in our history occurred in 1798. In that year the Order of St. John was expelled from Malta by the French under Napoleon, who captured the Island.

The French period was brief and turbulent. The Maltese soon became dissatisfied with the new regime and rose against the French whom they blockaded in Valletta and the three cities for two years. The apothecary M. Falzon of the village of Attard, who lived through those confused times, complains of the "sickness, mortality, desolation, lice, debts, anxieties and sadness" which he had to contend with. He describes the state of the Island as being so chaotic as to be nothing less than *una Babilonia tra tutti, in tutto e per tutto* (a Babel among us all, in everything and everywhere). He not only had to bear the brunt of personal tragedy through the loss of his brother and of his wife and the ruin of his business but also suffered political persecution at the hands of the French and their partisans (Ms. 756, RML). He has left us no detailed records of this persecution but we possess other documents relating to similar charges which another colleague had to face at this period.

He was the pharmacist Francesco Pisani, the owner of a pharmacy in *Strada Reale*, Senglea. The informers against Pisani described his pharmacy as a "club" where persons met during the night in summer "to disturb the neighbours with the playing of musical instruments and singing". The place was also the resort of priests, disgruntled French officers, "bad characters and many discontented and unbridled youths". In this "club", Pisani was alleged to have plotted, together with the physicians Michele Adriano, Giovanni Bruno and Gaetano Pisani, to assassinate General Vaubois and oust the French from Malta. These conspirators were said to have planned to send a Maltese boat in search of the British naval units that were cruising in the vicinity of the Island to invite them to enter our ports on the 10th August 1798. The sight of the British Fleet was to serve as a signal for an armed

revolt against the French. The ultimate aim of the conspirators was to set up a new independent republic.

Francesco Pisani and Michael Adriano were arrested and submitted to trial. Both of them protested their innocence of the charges brought up against them. They were not only pro-French but they were proud of being members of the National Guard (*Archivio Corte Civile*, Malta). Unfortunately we do not know how this trial ended and what happened to Pisani and Adriano as the records of the legal proceedings are incomplete. It appears, however, that they escaped a judicial death as their names have not been traced in the Registers of Deaths of the Parish Church of Senglea (Burlo', 1963).

More is known about another pharmacist who has left his imprint on the history of this epoch. He was Stanislaus Gatt who at first accepted public office under the French but later turned against them. Born about 1744, he studied pharmacy at the Holy Infirmary of Valletta. After qualifying in 1770 he set up in practice at Qormi, having bought the pharmacy of the *aromatario* Ignazio Cascin of that village (Arch. 1192, RML) where Gatt lived for the next forty years.

He entered public life in 1770 when he was appointed Jurat of Qormi. By 1798 he had risen to the rank of Syndic. When the French soldiers occupied Qormi they ransacked his home but he was retained in office with the title of President of the Municipality of Qormi and Luqa. His sympathies, however, were never with the French and when the Maltese insurrection broke out he was chosen by the insurgents to be President of the Blockade Committee and Commander of the Qormi Battalion. In his new role as leader of his village, he incurred heavy financial expenses in his efforts to obtain the necessary grain from Sicily to feed his soldiers and the people of Qormi. He realised that it was not enough to expel the French from Malta but that it was equally vital to bring the Island under a powerful protecting power. For this reason he put his signature to a petition addressed to the King of Sicily in which the Maltese leaders asked for the

transfer of the sovereignty of Malta to Great Britain.

For his services during the blockade he was awarded the *Patria liberata* gold medal by Sir Alexander Ball and also a scroll testifying to his zeal and bravery in the defence of the Island. After retiring from public life owing to ill health (Stellini, 1962 a), he went back to his pharmacy but did not cease to take an active interest in the social and political life of his village. Indeed between 1801 and 1803 he was engaged in defending the rights of the people of Qormi against the autocratic administration of the *Luogotenente* Manwel Gellel. Gatt died on the 4th March 1811 (Cardona, 1952). His pharmacy passed into the hands of the apothecary Giorgio Galdes whose father had married a Gatt. This pharmacy was still in existence at No. 1 St. Catherine Street, Qormi, until about 1853 (Stellini, 1962 b).

Politics again obtruded themselves into the life of apothecaries towards the mid-century when some of the pharmacists of Valletta came very prominently in the public eye. A characteristic feature of our times is the great number of clubs in our towns and villages that cater for a variety of tastes and interests. No such development had yet taken place in the mid-nineteenth century. In the absence of such facilities for companionship and for the exchange of views, the rudiments of political club-life were being fostered by the pharmacies of the time. Indeed it has already been seen how, at the close of the 18th century, a Senglea pharmacy was described as a "club". Pharmacies continued to play this role in the succeeding century when they formed the *rendez-vous* of groups of professional and cultured men who wended their way to the apothecary's in the evening to while away their leisure hours and to discuss the news and political topics of the day. Those were times of social and political unrest and turmoil in Europe. Events on the continent, on which Malta depended for its commerce and sustenance, were followed with avid interest in the Island. Attention was particularly focussed on southern Italy and on Sicily — these states being the nearest to us geographic-

ally, culturally and commercially. The Italian peninsula was then the scene of frequent armed risings. Many Italians and Sicilians were driven away from their homes by fear of persecution. Both revolutionary and reactionary refugees made Malta their temporary residence between 1821 and 1861 and found staunch sympathisers among both the liberal and the conservative elements of Maltese professional men. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that the pharmacies patronised by these professional *habitués* gained notoriety as the meeting places of Italian and Sicilian refugees and propagandists for the liberation and unification of Italy.

The pharmacies that came into the limelight for their political activities were those of Giovanni Bardon at 167 Merchants Street; of Vincenzo Duclos at 285, of Arpa at 240 and 241 and of Dr. C. Schinas at 56 Kingsway, Valletta (Laurenza, 1932).

Bardon's pharmacy was one of the haunts of the renowned Italian liberal refugee Nicola Fabrizi (1804-1885) (Mangion, 1962). As head of the association *Giovane Italia* he operated from Malta between 1837 and 1864 forging links and communications between Mazzini in London and a number of Italian political emigres in various parts of the Mediterranean (Laferla, 1938). Though opposed by reactionary elements and dogged by Bourbon spies in Malta he never ceased to fight for the unity and independence of Italy and in the 1864 was among those who welcomed Garibaldi to Malta (Bonello, 1963).

Schinas's pharmacy, also known as *Farmacia della Carita'*, was run by the pharmacist Emanuele Maria Borg "a man of proved ability and for many years assistant pharmacist of the Civil Hospital" (*Il portafoglio maltese*, 1840). He was a member of the *Associazione Patriottica Maltese* which had been founded on the 5th November 1848 for "the advancement of the people" in politics and public morality. Under the presidency of Dr. Gio Carlo Grech Delicata M.D., it survived until the 31st July 1852 when it was dissolved. (Fiorentini, 1966). It supported the Italian liberals and the unity of Italy and opposed the temporal power of the Papacy.

It published the paper *L'Avvenire* between 1849 and 1852 when it ceased to appear following the Bishop's censure.

Schinas's pharmacy fell under a cloud in 1850. Those were the days when political grievances on the part of citizens were made known to government by means of public petitions and memorials for which their promoters sought to obtain the greatest number of signatures. The *Farmacia della Carità*, the *Farmacia della Pietà* (known also as *Missierna*) and the *Farmacia Unione* were the favourite places for the signing of petitions sponsored by the *Associazione Patriottica Maltese* (*L'Ordine*, 1850 a). Because of its liberal principles the *Associazione* provoked the antagonism of the reactionary Italian elements who had found refuge in Malta and of their Maltese sympathizers. One of the loudest opponents of the *Associazione* was the newspaper *L'Ordine* which pleaded the cause of the Bourbons of the Two Sicilies and supported the temporal power of the Pope. This paper directed its tirades against the *Farmacia della Carità*, and although it never attacked Dr. Schinas, it did not spare the pharmacist. The doctor was abroad at the time but when he returned to Malta in October, *L'Ordine* grasped the opportunity to remark that Dr. Schinas, being a government employee and a person esteemed for his gentlemanly character, had every interest to see that his pharmacy was managed with honour and decorum. The paper also expressed the hope that he would send away from his establishment all those persons who had made it their "club". Though Schinas was of a liberal frame of mind, he had no intention of getting involved in the political agitations of his time. Weeks later, therefore, he took a more drastic step than that suggested by the newspaper — in fact nothing less than the closing down of his pharmacy in December of the same year (*L'Ordine*, 1850 b).

With the unification of Italy in 1861 and the return of Italian and Sicilian refugees to their country, Maltese pharmacies ceased to be the foci of Italian propaganda and political activity; but echoes of those days still reverberated in 1872. Indeed we read that in that year a

man was cudgelled by a doctor in Arpa's pharmacy for allegedly being an "impostor and a supporter of Garibaldi" (*La Fenice*, 1872).

In subsequent years a number of pharmacies eventually got involved in the web of Maltese party politics. This alignment into opposite ideological camps lasted well into the present century and was only brought to an end by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 and by the changed social, economic and political orientations of the post-war years.

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