

# YE OLDE APOTHECARY IN RABAT

THERE WAS A DAY AND AGE WHEN MEDICINES WERE NOT MASS PRODUCED, BUT HANDMADE TO DOCTOR'S ORDERS BY NONE OTHER THAN THE VILLAGE PHARMACIST. **MARIKA AZZOPARDI** REKINDLES SOME MEMORIES DURING A VISIT TO MALTA'S ONLY PHARMACY MUSEUM. SHE INTERVIEWS **MR MICHAEL BONNICI**.

The minute I step in, I am thrown back several decades to a time and place when as a child my mother took me with her to the local pharmacist. The scent of medical concoctions is the same, the lingering smell of pills and potions transports me back to a memory which no child of the 80s or later could relive.

This is the unique old pharmacy located within the building that houses the National Archives in Rabat. This may sound all too confusing and quite disjointed, so I should provide some explanation to the reader. The National Archives are found in Hospital Street in Rabat, Malta. The street name bears witness to the very same building wherein the archives are housed, the Santo Spirito Hospital. This hospital dates back to 1372 and ceased to serve as a hospital in the 1960s. As a stand-alone hospital, it enjoyed the luxury of having its own resident 'aromatorio' who managed the pharmacy housed within the building. And it is the self-same pharmacy I am visiting today.

To greet me is Mr Michael Bonnici, a former MP and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives. He is also a retired pharmacy technician who lived in a pharmacy practically all his life. 'My father owned the very old De Rohan Pharmacy of Ħaż-Żebbug which he bought in 1933 and which I bought from him. It was a "casa bottega" and so we grew up ensconced in the world of medicine. When I retired, I wanted

to donate some of my father's books to the National Archives. And that is how I chanced upon this old pharmacy.'

The small rooms were in a state of disrepair, although the original furniture was still in very good shape. 'I was enticed by the challenge of reviving this abandoned pharmacy and re-creating it to a semblance of its old self. It was intact although deprived of its original jars and accessories. My initiative set in a motion a process that has allowed for it to become what it is today.'

A tiny museum uniquely open by appointment, this pharmacy allows one the opportunity of travelling back in time. Because Mr Bonnici not only saw to it that the furniture got to be preserved and rehabilitated, but also continued to donate much of his own and of his father's antique pharmacy jars, bottles and equipment. He also embarked on an earnest and ongoing search through antique shops, auctions and flea markets with the purpose of re-stocking the pharmacy with any antique pharmaceutical item he would come across.

'This history of pharmacy in Malta is very long and intriguing. We were fortunate to receive much teaching from the Knights but also from religious orders such as the Franciscans who opened this hospital in the first place. And with the help of many curious items, I can show visitors how the pharmacist of old would go about dispensing medicine, as well as providing a service to the community and a supporting hand to the doctor in town.'

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Consider pills, or tablets as they were usually called. These did not come ready packed in plastic blister packs as they do today, nor were they mass produced in factories. Tablets were made by the pharmacist according to the doctor's prescription or according to his own knowledge of what would assist the patient. The pharmacist would measure and mix powders into a paste, roll it out and cut up to the correct size and weight of tablet with special tools. The final tablets would be finished off with a powder to avoid them from sticking together. Capsules also existed, and these were made out of digestible rice paper shaped like tiny flat round tubs with a base and a lid to them, in which the special mixture of powder was deposited and closed in.

There are the curios, such as a complete box full of injection vials belonging to a doctor in action during WWII. Or the dropper bottles made entirely of fine glass and incorporating a special minuscule groove that controls each and every drop. And of course, there are the medicine jars full of still fragrant oils such as eucalyptus. I learn that the medicine bottles come in different colours and details for a purpose. Dark brown and smooth glass bottles were



meant for natural oils or minerals which required darkness to remain effective. Blue and ridged bottles indicated a poisonous substance. Green bottles indicated corrosive substances.

And what about the old ledgers which belonged to Mr Bonnici Snr, full of hand-written and numbered prescriptions, all diligently documented on a daily basis to a total of 110,000 prescriptions in a lifetime ... there is so much more to take in, observe, ask questions about and Mr Bonnici is a fount of information, knowledge and memories to draw upon. So much so, that one single visit to this unique museum pharmacy is simply not enough. ✚



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