

GOVERNMENT ARCHIVES IN WARTIME

Useful information on Government archives during the War can be found in the following departmental reports published as supplements to the Government Gazette:

Report of the Notary to Government for the years 1945-46, 1947-48, and 1949-50.

Report on the working of H.M. Superior Courts for 1945-46.

The bulk of the sections relating to archives consists of a description of the various measures taken to remove them to safer localities, to salvage them from the debris and to sort them out and assess the losses sustained during the War. The Notary to Government's Report for 1945-46 also contains a useful historical note which is here summarised.

Notarial Archives: As from the 1st April, 1922 the Director of Public Registry ceased to be Keeper of the Notarial Archives, which post became merged with that of Notary to Government under the title of Notary to Government and Keeper of the Notarial Archives.

Up to 1850 there were two repositories of Notarial Acts in Malta, one at Notabile and one in Valletta. Ordinance No. II of 1849 laid down that there shall be only one repository, that all the records preserved at Notabile shall be removed to the Valletta repository and that the repository at Notabile shall be suppressed. The upper floor of the Auberge d'Italie was earmarked for the purpose and to this repository both the records in Notabile and those in the old repository at the Public Registry, Valletta, were transferred.

The Auberge d'Italie remained the sole repository of all Notarial Acts until 1939, when steps were taken to remove all the original records from the upper floor of the Auberge d'Italie to safer places. Accordingly 8,790 volumes were transferred to the basement of the same Auberge, and 12,200 volumes, for which no space could be found there, were stored in a basement at St. Andrew Street, Valletta, underlying the house at No. 88 Britannia Street. On the 28th February, 1941 a bomb hit this house and the records stored therein had to be removed urgently elsewhere. Additional shelves were fitted in the basement of the Auberge d'Italie and the 12,200 volumes removed from St. Andrew Street were crammed therein.

The Registers (i.e. copies of the original deeds) were in due course removed from the upper floor of the Auberge d'Italie to two rooms in the Bastion Walls at Imdina.

On the 7th April, 1942 the Auberge d'Italie was heavily damaged and the basement was completely demolished. The volumes were recovered and transferred partly to the concrete shelter at the Palace, Valletta, and partly to St. Alphonsus Priory at Birkirkara.

Steps were at once taken to prepare duplicate registers of the original deeds destroyed through enemy action and the necessary legislation was enacted for this purpose. All the Registers which were still in the upper floor of the Auberge d'Ita-

lie practically suffered no damage at all and they were removed to two rooms in the walls of Imdina Bastions.

The sorting and the arrangement of volumes were taken in hand and it was decided to start with the volumes published by Notaries since 1890. Meanwhile all the Registers were arranged in the rooms at Imdina Bastions and made available to the public. The sorting and examination of volumes was completed by 1947-48. The examination of the deeds published prior to 1890, (8,720 vols. by 540 Notaries), was then taken in hand and has now been completed.

At the time of the bombing there were in the Museum basement 6,465 volumes of original deeds published since 1890, belonging to 118 notaries. Of these, 685 volumes (10.6%) were damaged beyond repair, 158 (2.4%) were missing, 608 (9.4%) were damaged but repairable and 938 (14.5%) required re-binding.

Up to 1949-50, 347 duplicate registers and 631 copies of deeds were prepared, and 722 volumes were repaired or bound.

In December, 1945 the scattered Archives were reassembled in one repository in Valletta at No. 24, St. Christopher Street.

Court Archives: In April, 1941 the Law Court Buildings in Valletta, including the Archives, were demolished by enemy action, and a great part of the records, dating from the beginning of the 16th century, was buried under the debris. By the end of July, however, the documents had been recovered and the greater part was transferred to the Diocesan Seminary at Floriana which had been placed at the disposal of the Government for the accommodation of the Superior Courts. A small part of the records was stored in a shelter underlying the Palace, Valletta.

An Official Compiler of Court Records was appointed on the 16th September, 1941. The appointee was entrusted with the duty of assisting the Registrar of the Superior Courts in the re-ordination and re-organisation of the Court Archives. This work was well in hand by March 1942, but then it was interrupted when the temporary Court buildings at Floriana received a direct hit in April of that year. On the 27th April the building was severely damaged, and the bulk of the records housed therein, as well as several office registers, were again buried under the debris, while a certain portion thereof were destroyed. The Courts were then transferred to a house at Balzan on the 4th May, 1942, but the new premises were again hit on the 6th June and the Prize Court records and several office documents were once more buried under the debris. Practically all the records and documents, however, were recovered in a short time.

As the premises at Balzan were too restricted, only a small part of the Archives could be housed there. Part of the Archives were therefore left at St. Calcedonio, Floriana, and the bulk, including the Archives of the Knights of St. John, was removed to St. Dominic's Priory at Rabat.

By 1945 the Superior Courts had been transferred to the Auberge d'Italie, Valletta, together with H.M. Civil and Commercial Courts, the Rent Restriction Board and the Emergency Compensation Board. That part of the Archives left at Floriana was removed to the new Court premises, and the remaining documents stored at St. Dominic's Priory at Rabat were transferred to the top floor of the Auberge d'Italie where the complete Archives of the Superior Courts are now assembled.