

MEDICO SOCIAL ASPECTS OF OLD AGE IN MALTA THE HISTORICAL VIEWPOINT

P. Cassar

*St Luke, Pope Alexander VII Junction,
Balzan, Malta*

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

According to Maltese historical records available so far, the elderly first emerge as a group and as a source of concern on the part of the State, in the mid-sixteenth century when the Maltese Islands had been under the rule of the Order of St John of Jerusalem for the previous twenty years.

The stimulus was provided by the incessant warfare in which the Order of St John, like other European powers, was engaged against the Turks in the Mediterranean.

The 1551 the Order of St John anticipated a Turkish invasion of the Maltese Islands. A major problem, in the event of an attack by Ottoman naval and military forces, was presented by the civilian population that could not be defended within the few fortifications available at the time. A remedy was found in the evacuation en masse of the 'useless civilians', i.e. the aged, the women and children, from Malta and Gozo and their transfer to the southern coasts of Sicily. A similar exodus of old people and other helpless civilians took place in April-May 1565 when news of Turkish military preparations against Malta reached the island.

THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

From the seventeenth century onwards the question of the aged became inseparably linked with the problem of poverty and of the very low standard of living of the masses; so much so that the issue of poverty is central to our theme as the welfare and care of the elderly was caught in the net of the economic circumstances of the time. However a few remedial measures were taken:

- (a) By 1636 facilities for the reception of old paupers were in existence at Santo Spirito Hospital at Rabat, Malta;
- (b) The erection in 1667 of the first private institution devoted to the care of the aged and infirm, also at Rabat, which became known as Saura Hospital after its founder Nr Nicholas Saura. That home is still functioning.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By the third decade of the eighteenth century the number of 'invalid poor' had remained sufficiently numerous as to induce Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena to provide a residential home for their upkeep in 1732. This home became known as the Ospizio or Casa di Carita. By the following year the inmates were about three hundred and eighty when the population of the Maltese Islands was estimated to be one hundred and ten thousand (110,000).

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The distinction between the aged, the infirm and the purely indigent remained blurred in the bureaucratic mind of the government for many years afterwards because the gravest preoccupation of the time was still how to deal with the hardships of poverty. However, we get a glimpse of the condition of the elderly at the close of the first decade of the century from the pen of a foreign visitor. He observed that in the general population of Malta of about one hundred thousand souls 'it is not rare to meet old people, especially women, of ninety and even one hundred years, who are still alert and robust and who have lost none of their teeth and who preserve all their intellectual faculties and their muscular

strength' till the end of their lives. 'The Maltese', remarked the same traveller, 'are careful, like the ancient Spartans, to show respect and honour towards the aged ... In fact they consider it a great moral depravity and proof of arrogant barbarity, hard heartedness and stupidity to jeet at old people who merit all reverence on account of their age' (1820).

The elderly, as a group, burst unexpectedly on the medical scene in 1837 when on the 9th June cholera broke out in epidemic proportions. It invaded the Ospizio. As the disease spread among the seven hundred and fifty inmates, six hundred forty-five of them were removed to another location in the hope of arresting the progress of the illness. Far from ceasing, however, the disease continued to advance with many fatalities. It has been estimated that five hundred and thirty inmates contracted the disease and that four hundred and forty two of them died - a mortality of 81%.

By the mid-century living conditions at the Ospizio had become so bad that government took steps, in 1862, to plan a new building. Among those consulted, when the plans were drawn up, was Miss Florence Nightingale who thus expressed herself:- 'The plans are so good that the difficulty is how to find a fault. I could not discover a single sanitary lapse ... It is a consolation to know that there will be one good civil hospital in the British Dominions for an example'. The hospital - called Asylum for the Aged and Incurable or Poor House was opened on the 3rd October 1892.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Until the outbreak of the Second World War (1939), the 'patriarchal' or 'pyramidal' pattern of family structure still prevailed among families in the Maltese Islands - in the sense that the elderly lived within the family and in the same household with the younger generation where the eldest man and woman exercised a great authoritative influence on the way of thinking and behaviour of the members of the whole family. This pattern began to break down in the years following the end of the War owing to the destruction of many houses and the dispersal of families due to evacuation from the damaged and bombed areas. Concurrently

with this phenomenon the twentieth century saw two far reaching changes in the fields of geriatrics and gerontology - one on the national level and the other on the international plane. On the national level there were:

- (a) the realisation that by the year 2000 the number of persons of sixty years and over was expected to reach almost 15% of the total population of the Maltese Islands;
- (b) the concept of encouraging and helping the elderly to continue living in the surroundings to which they were accustomed and housed in their own town and villages;
- (c) the provision by the state of all possible assistance to the elderly so that they could lead an independent life in the community; and
- (d) a free medical and nursing service for them, based on the poly-clinics in various localities.

To co-ordinate and promote the implementation of measures in the overall care and rehabilitation of the elderly, the Maltese Government, in 1987, created the Secretariat for the Care of the Elderly under the direction of the Parliamentary Secretary, Professor John Rizzo Naudi, with responsibilities for the residential home of St Vincent de Paule complex (1,100 persons); the nursing of the elderly within the community; the training of doctors and paramedical staff in geriatrics; and the provision of an acute geriatric teaching hospital at the Zammit Clapp building previously commonly known as the Blue Sisters Hospital, at St Julians.

On the international level Malta's outstanding contribution was the establishment in Malta of the first United Nations International Institute for Aging. This achievement was the cumulative result of sustained interest and endeavour, on the part of successive Maltese governments, originally initiated in 1968 by the Maltese Ambassador to the United Nations. The Institute was officially opened at Valletta on the 15th April 1988 by the United Nations Secretary General Mr Javier Peres de Cuellar.

The main tasks of the Institute are:

- (a) to prepare training programmes and courses of degree level in gerontology in collaboration with the University of Malta for participants particularly from developing countries;
- (b) carrying research projects on the awareness of the issues regarding aging by utilising all forms of communication media.

CONCLUSION

The historical process we have traced has led us to the following considerations:

- (a) Old age is not a phenomenon that strikes us unexpectedly and suddenly at the arbitrary age of 60 but is a long drawn out process that starts and evolves gradually years before retiring age;
- (b) The general welfare of the elderly is inseparable from that of their state of health;
- (c) It is the state's responsibility and duty to provide a service to ensure the physical and psychological matrix for a comfortable and useful old age; but it is also the personal responsibility of every man and woman to safeguard their own health years before the onset of senescence so that they will not have to rely exclusively on measures provided by the state in the economic, social and medical fields;
- (d) And lastly keep repeating to the younger generation the admirable lesson of Ecclesiasticus (Chap. 3, vv. 14 & 15) written 200 years Before Christ:-

'Son, support the old age of thy father; and grieve him not in his life.

And if his understanding fail, have patience with him, and despise him not when thou art in thy strength; for the relieving of the father shall not be forgotten ...'