

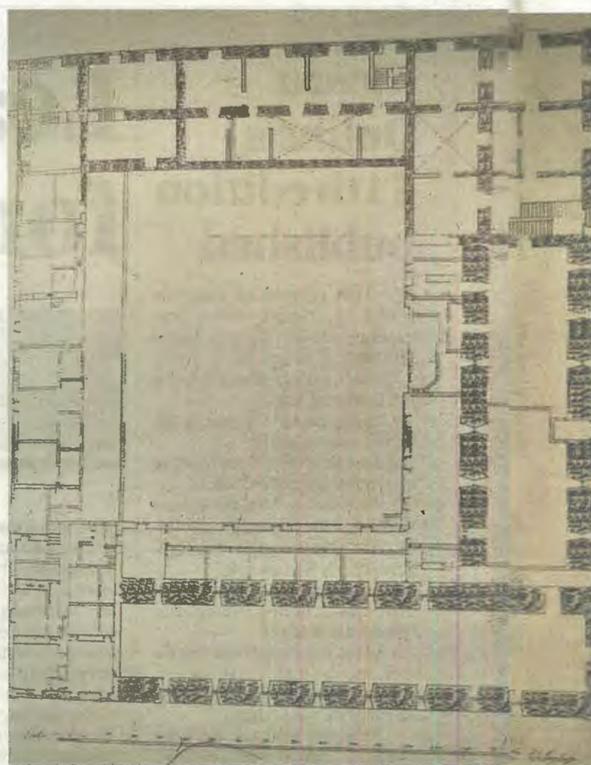
## LIFE &amp; WELLBEING HISTORY



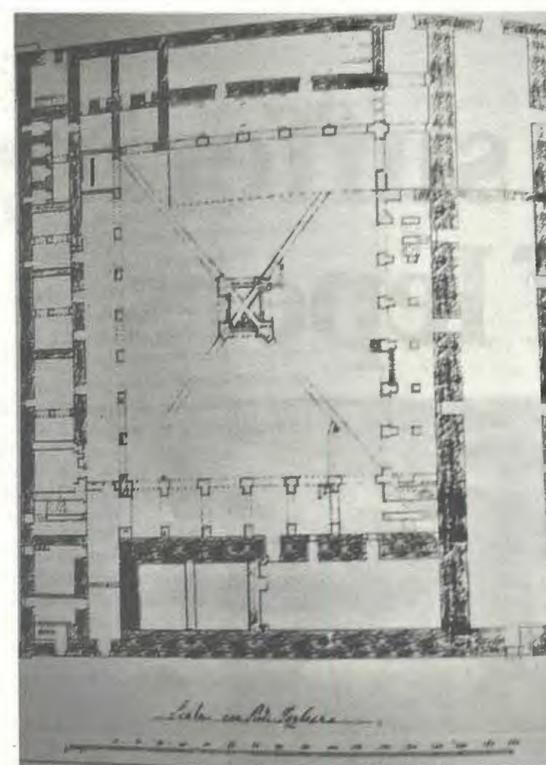
The upper part of the façade of the old courts and prison building, known as the Castellania, which today houses the Health Ministry.



The interior of a prison cell in the Castellania.



Plan of the first floor of the Grand Prisons.



Plan of the ground floor of the Grand Prisons.



Cover of Dominique Miège's book.

# Miège's description of prisons in early British Malta

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In 1840, Dominique Miège, who had served as the resident French consul in Malta between 1827 and 1831, published *L'histoire de Malte*. The title of the book is a misnomer as it deals with more than just Maltese history. The extensive 240-page book is divided into three sections, two of which provide detailed information about the geographical, administrative, economic, social and other aspects of local life. The third deals with the history of the Maltese islands.

In his account, Miège includes five pages that describe the local criminal detention system. Miège focused on the two civil prisons in Valletta: the Castellania Prison in Strada Mercanti and the Great Prison in Strada San Cristoforo. Miège did not mention the other prisons then extant in Senglea and in Victoria, Gozo.

Miège referred to the Castellania as La Chatellanie. At the time, the building had a dual function, that of a law courts as well as a detention centre for those awaiting or undergoing trial. This building, which today houses the Ministry for Health, also detained convicts awaiting capital punishment.

The Great Prison, which Miège called La Grand Prison, was the one that the Order of St John had previously used as accommodation for slaves, then known as *il Bagno*. This was accessed from Strada San Cristoforo and had one side overlooking 'le Vecchie Barracche' (Lower Barrakka Garden). This building was damaged during World War II and was later replaced by a block of apartments.

The prisoners in the Great Prison were segregated according to the nature of their crime and therefore according to their length of stay, sex and age, as follows: a) those condemned to serve from 15 years to life; b) those condemned from 10 to 14 years; c) those sentenced from three to nine years; d) inmates detained for minor crimes; e) debtors; f) women; and g) juveniles (boys).

Those awaiting banishment from Malta were also lodged in the same building. The section for women, which was known as *l'Asilo*, fell under the responsibility of a 'Committee for Charitable Institutions'. According to the Prisons Report of 1831, the female section was transferred the

previous year to the *l'Ospizio* in Floriana, following recommendations for a prisons reform. Apparently, Miège was not aware of this move and so, in his book published in 1841, the author maintained that the female section was still in the Grand Prison. In the whole prison only the 'Boys' Section was termed as 'correctional'.

Like all other prisons, the Great Prison fell under the responsibility of the Deputy Superintendent General of Police. Miège refers to the administration of the Great Prison as *La Conciergerie*. It was headed by a director aided by eight jailers employed by government. At the time when Miège was in Malta, the prison director was a certain Jacob Lumsdon, presumably a Briton, who had been running the Great Prison since 1820.

The average annual salary of each jailer amounted to £20. This was slightly less than the average salary of a labourer. According to a statement by Colonel George Whitmore to an investigative Committee for Colonial Affairs, chaired by Lord Viscount Erbrington, the average daily wage in those days was one shilling per day – calculated on a six-day working week this would amount to around £15 per year.

Some jailers opted to lodge inside the same prison building in exchange for a reduction in their salary. The duties of the jailers included guarding over the inmates and inspecting the prison cells at least once a day to ensure that no subversive action, such as attempts to escape, took place. Jailers were obliged to present a daily report to the prisons' director on the situation of the area under their responsibility.

Jailers were also obliged to act as caretakers and handymen, doing menial jobs for the upkeep of the place. For instance, they were to sweep the floors daily and wash them at least once every two days in the summer months, and twice weekly in winter. They were even duty bound to whitewash the cells and the corridors at least once every three months.

Relatives were allowed to visit inmates of the Great Prison once a month. Miège states that only judges, magistrates, the prison doctor, the prison chaplain and members of certain charitable institutions were permitted inside the prison. By comparison, detainees kept in the Castellania were allowed daily visits by relatives and friends.



Ex Voto from Tal-Fhniena Chapel in Żejtun showing a person who was held in the Castellania for some time, praying to the Madonna while in jail awaiting trial. Apparently the trial ended in his favour, hence the ex voto. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL BUHAGIAR.

The jailers were to ensure that no smuggling of alcohol or playing cards took place. Nevertheless, a moderate amount of wine could be purchased by inmates from the prison canteen that opened briefly each day. This was done under the strict supervision of the jailers and the wine was to be consumed soon after.

Miège mentions that wine was allowed in moderation to sick inmates. This statement corroborates another that the present author has come across that proves that it was then believed that wine had some sort of curative qualities. Ovid Doublet, who in the late 18th century was secretary to several Grand Masters, stated that when he was taken ill for a long period, well wishers who came to visit him presented him with wine.

According to the Prison Reports for the years under study, the Great Prison contained 12 halls each accommodating between 12 and 48 inmates. There were three cells that could each accommodate six boys. Miège referred to these juvenile convicts as *des enfants* (children). There

were also seven cells for debtors. There were also 11 solitary cells, of which five were referred to as the 'dark cells'. The latter were used for solitary confinement.

According to the same reports, the Great Prison alone could accommodate some 300 inmates. The number of prisoners inside the prison averaged between 150 and 200 inmates at any given time. The Castellania housed 95 inmates, while the Senglea and the Gozo prisons could accommodate 45 each.

According to Miège, prisoners were not allowed to remain inside their cells during the day, but were engaged productively in a workshop from sunrise to dusk, with a break of between 1½ and 2¼ hours, depending on the type of work they were forced to do.

The Great Prison had a central courtyard. This was divided into four different divisions, the inmates being segregated according to aforementioned classification. Miège referred to a "fountain" inside the courtyard that appar-

ently abutted one of the pilasters (Miège said that "above it there was a chapel"). In this case *une fontain* in French could refer to any source of water, not necessarily a free-standing fountain.

Debtors were housed on the upper floor with female inmates and juveniles, albeit in separate sections. Debtors were to serve not more than two years in jail. They could opt to rent a single cell rather than share one with others. Inmates who were on good behaviour could have their sentence commuted to a shorter term. As already mentioned, until 1831, females were detained in this building (on the upper floor), but were later transferred to the *l'Ospizio* section in Floriana. This made it possible for juvenile delinquents at the Great Prison to be separated from debtors detained on the upper floor.

On being admitted, prisoners were immediately washed and examined by the prison doctor. They then had their hair shaved almost to the scalp. If in poor condition, their clothes were burnt; if in a decent state, they were kept for safe-keeping until the owner was released. Each new prisoner was provided with two pairs of trousers, a jacket and two cotton shirts. Each was also supplied with a straw mattress (Miège referred to it a *paillasse*) to sleep on and two blankets.

Each morning, on waking up, inmates had to make their own bed and to wash themselves at one of the water 'fountains' in the building. Prisoners were provided with fresh soap and towels twice a week. On Saturdays, they were to receive a good shave. (Miège did not state whether this included cropping of the hair as when first admitted to keep the head constantly shaved).

All inmates were regularly examined by the police doctor once a week. Sick prisoners were examined daily and the doctor prescribed medicine and a dietary regime according to their case. Whenever a patient required hospital treatment, this was authorised by the prison director. However, if the inmate was serving a sentence of more than 10 years, special authorisation to leave the building was needed from higher authorities.

Prisoners were provided with a daily ration of 26 ounces (737 grams) of brown bread and four ounces (113.39g) of second quality pasta or macaroni served as part of the ingredients in the soup that could also contain lentils, peas or beans. Apart from this, the daily ration included 2¼ ounces (70.5 g) of cheese, salted fish and olives. This food was provided by an appointed caterer, who charged the prison author-

ities two tari and 10 *habbiet* for every meal served. Although English currency had just been introduced in Malta in 1825, transactions continued to be carried out in *scudi* long afterwards. One *scudo* (one shilling, eight pence), was made of 12 *tari*, and 1 *tari* consisted of 20 *granj* (*habbiet*).

A chart was hung in the building to show the ration due to each prisoner and a weighing apparatus was also made available for the prisoners to check whether they were receiving rations accordingly. Prisoners could forego their ration in exchange for an equivalent sum of money.

**"Some jailers opted to lodge inside the same prison building in exchange for a reduction in their salary"**

The Great Prisons had its own workshop, albeit a rather small one, for inmates to produce certain products. Through their forced labour, inmates were able to earn a small income, working as tailors or artisans, producing straw hats, baskets, mats and brooms in the workshop. The prisoners were handed half of their pay each week, while the other half was kept in safe-keeping for them to receive when released from jail. Prisoners could opt to forward their regular earnings to their families. However, inmates only received two-fifths of what was their due; three-fifths of their earnings were forfeited to the authorities. Of this sum, two-fifths was retained for the upkeep and clothing; one-fifth was divided between the administrators and the jailers.

Convicts serving more than 10 years were compelled to undertake forced labour outside the prisons as there was not enough space for them all in the prison workshop. Thus, long-term criminals were daily transferred in chains to clean the streets of Valletta, Floriana and the cities in the Cottonera. Alternately, they were to work as required on public projects.

Miège stated that as far as he was aware, some worked on Corradino Hill, while others worked on dredgers (known as *carracca*), to clear the seabed of the Grand Harbour from silt. The Prisons Report of 1831 added that some of the inmates were posted to

work at "the granaries". The jailers assigned to watch over the convicts were drawn from the Royal Malta Fencibles Regiment. According to the Austen-Lewis Report, presented to the House of Lords on January 10, 1938, this regiment often executed duties pertaining to the Malta Police Force, whose complement at the time numbered a mere 80 police members.

The same report stated that 40 soldiers were assigned to such guard duties. These soldiers were armed with muskets and bayonets, a state of affairs that the commissioners lamented as being "repugnant to English habits and opinions". In the statistical sheet of the same report, the number of guards from the Royal Malta Fencibles was quoted as 23. The reason for this discrepancy might be explained by assuming that not all the 40 soldiers assigned to this duty were undertaking duties on a daily basis.

Prisoners who refused to work, idled about and played games of chance, and those found guilty of pilfering from other inmates had their food rations reduced for several days. Those who persisted in such behaviour were shackled in "heavy chains" in the "dark cells" of the prisons, and fed a restricted diet. Any attempt to escape from prison would be punished with the same punitive measures. Furthermore, the court could also order transgressors to be whipped.

Prisoners attended Mass on Sundays and on obligatory feast days; they gathered in segregated groups according to classification in the courtyard. The prison chaplain was allowed to visit prisoners daily for confessions. If the prisoner was of a different denomination, the individual was allowed to be visited by a minister belonging to his faith.

At the time, prisons served solely to detain criminals as a way of punishment and to protect society. No initiatives were taken to correct and rehabilitate criminals were ever put into action. The Great Prison ceased to operate in 1850 when Corradino Civil Prison opened – or rather closed – its gates in Paola.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Stephanie Borghino-Morana for her assistance in the translations from the French in Miège's book. Thanks also to Emmanuel Barbara at the Castellania for his help. The author would also like to thank Michael Cassar for editing the text.

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