

THE SARDINIA TRAGEDY

by Dr. Giovanni Bonello KM. LLD.

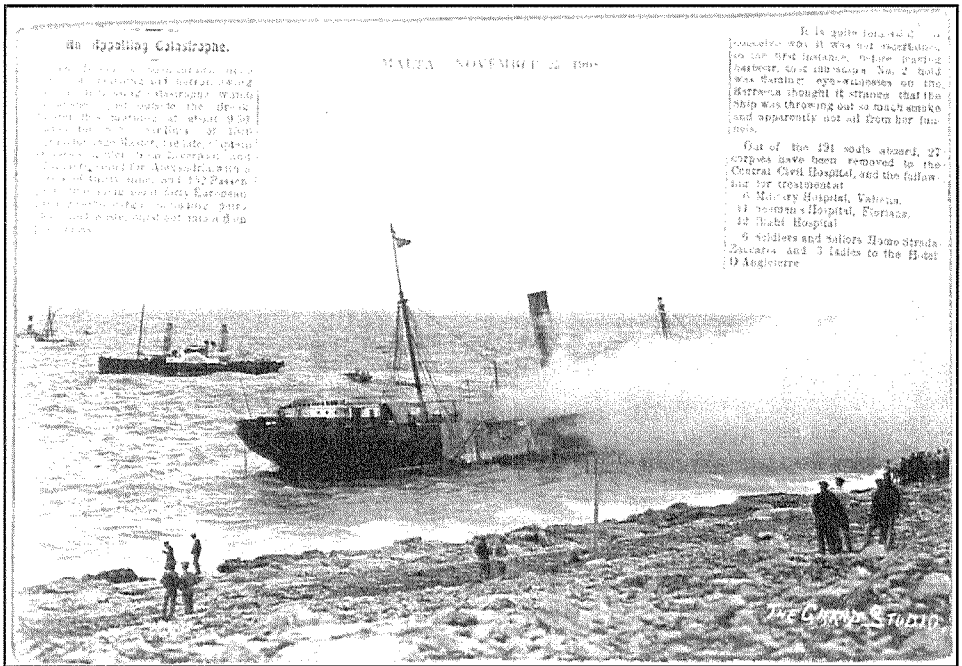
Maltese postcard publishers turned one of the worst accidents in local maritime history into an attractive business opportunity. Many lost their lives, horribly scorched or suffocated to death, but there was money to be made on the side. Cards of the S.S. *Sardina* disaster were plentiful, and still turn up regularly at postal auctions and dealers. I have counted more than a dozen, all printed by the photographic process.

The S.S. *Sardina*, formerly the S.S. *Gulf of Matapan*, a small 1514 ton passenger and cargo steamer of the Ellerman & Papyanni line, was a regular, if unobtrusive, visitor to Grand Harbour. On November 25, 1908, when the ship was leaving port at 9.30 a.m. bound for Alexandria people at the Baracca noticed smoke coming out of the ventilator over No 2 hold, in front of the bridge. This was the beginning of a saga that ended with so many dead.

The *Sardina* was on a rather special trip. It had left Tangiers five days earlier, carrying a number of Moslems on their way to a pilgrimage to Mecca. The ship's questionnaire, signed by her ill-fated captain Charles Littler, listed a crew of 39, and 154 passengers. Persistent rumours claimed that another ten Arabs had illegally stowed away on her.



Postcard of the S. S. Sardina beached near Xgħajra, still engulfed by flames and smoke



Postcard, published by "The Grand Studio", showing the Sardinia and a brief account of the disaster

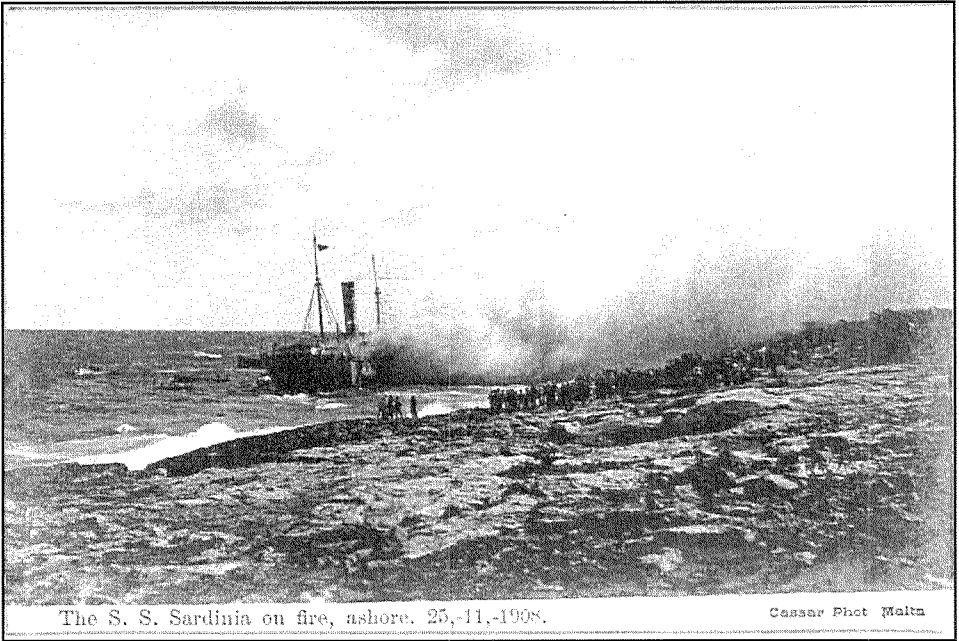
Littler, from Birkenhead, was only 45 years old then. His wife and his mother Lydia Ann survived him.

On board, the smoke was noticed just as the ship left the break-water. Littler ordered his ship to return to harbour. Within minutes the vessel broke out in flames, with a first deafening explosion. The flames which engulfed all the central part of the vessel prevented those on board from finding a way to safety. They also destroyed the four life-boats.

Out of control, but with her rudder jammed landward, the stricken ship, a ball of fire, ran aground near Xghajra, about a mile north of the harbour entrance. Had the rudder kept a straight course, the *Sardinia* would have drifted in the open sea, making salvage operations almost impossible.

Even at Xghajra, the launches that rushed to offer help found that extremely difficult "because of the rough seas, the circular movements of the ship and the flames that raged all over her, no launch could approach the ship and save the wretches directly; they had to hurl themselves into the sea to be saved, or clutch at the ropes when the launches could approach the ship."¹

"The majority of the Arabs, the report adds, refused to jump into the sea, and it is probable that many of them died on board the ship exactly because they did not want to jump into the sea".²



The S. S. Sardinia on fire, ashore. 25-11-1908.

Cassar Phot Malta

Another postcard of the same event, issued by Salvatore Lorenzo Cassar

Another daily had this account of the Arab passengers: “Moorish pilgrims from Tangier on their way to Mecca (they) were divided into two classes, one apparently peasants, and the other well-to-do people. They were all well supplied with money, which possibly accounts for their being so unwilling to leave the ship.”

They refused all orders to leave the hatches “to which they clung desperately”. When the flames engulfed the ship “there were heart-breaking scenes among the Arabs who counted many women and children. They wept and clung to one another, but made no attempt to save themselves by jumping overboard, as they were continually urged to do both by those in the boats below and by the crew”.³

The rescuers recovered twenty seven dead bodies from the sea.

Before the *Sardinia* ran aground at Xghajra at 11.00 a.m., she described five full circles at diminishing speed. It is not clear why she did not return to harbour - possibly because she was disabled and her superior officers among the first to die. It is certain that the authorities had barred the stricken ship from re-entering Valletta harbour, not to constitute a danger to the inhabitants and other shipping berthed there. The *Sardinia* kept burning through the night.

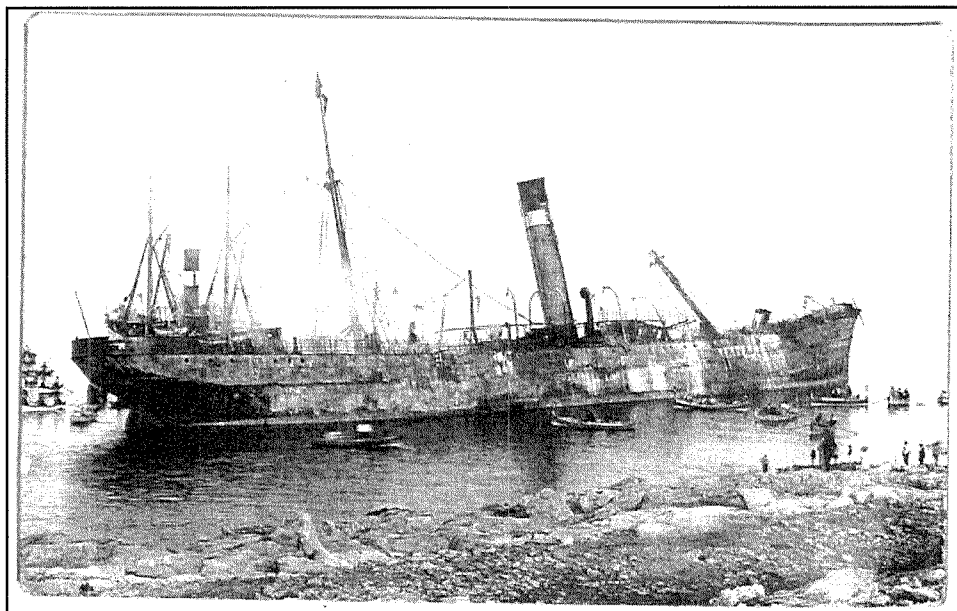
The chronicles have preserved many an episode related to that sad morning. James Jennings, an old passenger who survived, recounted his recollections of the last moments of the master. “I and Captain Littler were chatting about some cigars the captain had bought before leaving Malta. I jokingly remarked I would partner

him in the smoking of them. At this moment a Moorish gentleman named Sidi Li Skalli went up to the captain and informed him that fire had broken out. The captain rushed to the spot indicated - after that he was seen no more.⁴

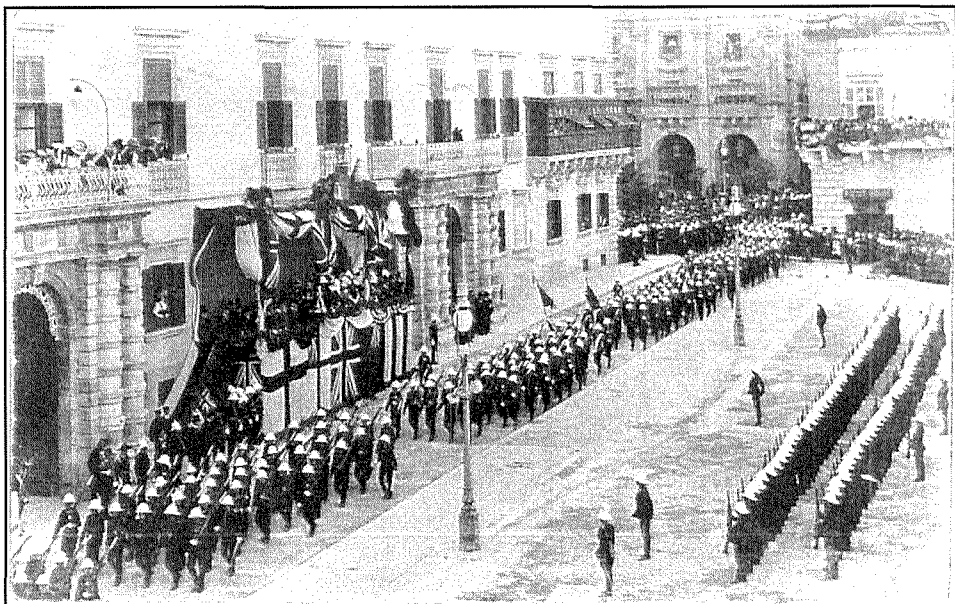
Dris Sidi Mohammed Skalli seemed to have been the unofficial head of the Moslem group. He held the contacts with the authorities, and before leaving Malta asked for a private meeting with the Duke of Connaught, then in Malta with the Mediterranean fleet. Described as “a gentleman of culture and distinction” Skalli met the Duke at the Palace and thanked him for the assistance his countrymen had received.

On deck was a coop of hens belonging to Mrs Jane Berry, wife of the Famagusta harbour-master. An Arab got hold of the coop already on fire, freed the poor chickens, and threw the coop and himself overboard. One chicken survived, its feathers all singed, on the poop of the ship.

And Miss Kate Gilmore, a maid on board, did not heed the alarm, taking it for exaggerated. When a member of the crew confirmed the danger, she ran to where the fire was, heard the first explosion, and hurried back to the poop. She stayed there until the ship beached and sub-inspector Lopez from a steam tug of the Customs department, ordered her to descend. She suffered no harm at all.⁵ The very last person to be saved! Kate Gilmore recovered from the shock at the Hotel d'Angleterre.



Postcard of the gutted Sardinia, after the fire was extinguished



Postcard of a parade in honour of the Duke of Connaught, 1907, in Main Guard Square, Valletta. The Duke took a leading part in the relief operations of the victims of the Sardinia

Another more or less lucky creature was a little Arab boy, taken for treatment at the Seamen's hospital where other Arabs were being seen to. Suddenly the boy rushed away from the nurse and threw himself in the arms of his father - the only two survivors in a family of eight, including the mother.

Only 108 outlived the disaster, of which 56 were burnt or otherwise injured. 85 perished - 95 if the story of the stowaways is true.

The authorities immediately organised what rescue and assistance appeared possible. Dockyard and naval tug-boats and pinnacles, together with private sea-craft soon gathered round the distressed ship trying to save those who had jumped overboard. The chief port officer, Captain Stivala, rescued three Arabs and a British sailor who had fallen in the water during the operations. The well-remembered ferry *Gleneagles*, on its return trip from Gozo, also joined and did its best.

Men came from Lascaris barracks and the St John's Ambulance Association. Each helped as well he could to save life, nurse the afflicted and recover dead bodies.

The Admiral Commander in Chief, Sir A Curzon-Howe took overall command of the rescue and relief operations, though the Duke and Duchess of Connaught also distinguished themselves in their zeal and support. About forty medical doctors flocked to the Custom house.

On land, the Passengers' and Luggage Inspection Rooms at the Customs house fulfilled the function of emergency infirmaries. The four major hospitals - Bighi, the Central Civil, the Military Station and the British Seamen's - received all those requiring treatment. The others gathered at the Hotel d'Angleterre in Strait Street and the British Hotel at the top of St Ursula Street. The surviving Arabs found refuge in the Hotel de Tunis in the same road. The Soldiers' and Sailors' Institute also took in some. Nuns of the Fra Diego Institute of Hamrun sowed clothes for those who had lost everything.

As expected, crowds gathered at Xghajra, at Ricasoli and St Elmo to watch the tragedy unfurl. The clergy's presence also proved substantial; the Vicar-General, Mgr Salvatore Grech first went to the Customs house, and then to the scene of the accident. The 'chaplain' of the Ottoman government residing in Malta, Ahmed Nazif Effendi, is not mentioned among those who assisted at the time of the disaster, but with the Turkish Consul Azarian Effendi, later took part in the burials in the Turkish cemetery at Marsa.

Among the many who visited the survivors in the Central Hospital was the Duke of Connaught. He invited the Arabs through an interpreter not to worry about the money or other belongings they had lost on board, as he would provide whatever was necessary.⁶ In fact researchers found French francs and napoleons, and Spanish gold pieces, besides skeletons and charred human remains - among others, those of the Tangier Collector of Customs. The Duke also took on himself the needs of three Indian survivors.

The victims embraced different faiths. The majority comprised the Moroccan Muslims on their way to Mecca. One Jew was buried by the Rabbi in the Jewish cemetery. Arturo Orbelli, a businessman from Trent, then Austrian, died after being landed. His funeral took place in the Church of St Francis in Valletta, and his embalmed body was sent for internment in his home town. Charles Mooney, a stoker, received a Catholic burial.

Those belonging to the Protestant churches were interred at Ta' Braxia by the Chaplain of St Paul's Anglican Cathedral, the Rev. William Evered, and by the Presbyterian Chaplain of the Fleet, the Reverend Sim. Ahmed Nazif Effendi, laid the Muslims to rest in the once beautiful Turkish cemetery at the Marsa.

What had actually caused the tragedy never quite surfaced. The fires originated in the Number Two hold, where, the *Malta* stated, "was a great deposit of coal, and it seems excluded that on board that ship there were explosive or flammable substances. The fire seems exclusively due to the coal gas, and to the same gas the explosion that followed."⁷

The ship's captain, in compiling the questionnaire required by Art. 8 of Ordinance IX of 1856, expressly answered 'Nil' to the question "Declare what quantity of gunpowder or other combustibile you have on board?" However, the enquiry headed

by Magistrate Fiteni, came to a different conclusion: “The cause of the fire may be due to the imprudence of someone on board”. The Board expressed the opinion that flammable or explosive material had been clandestinely placed on board. They excluded that the fire had been caused by an accumulation of coal gas, as this would have been dispersed by the ventilators, and the explosions would have been one, rather than several as was the case.

A second “Board of Trade” enquiry, held by Magistrate Giovanni Battista Mifsud, interviewed some of the survivors. The conclusion did not exclude the presence on board of flammable goods. What they found ascertained was that the ship lacked sufficient life-saving and fire-fighting equipment.

The sixty or so Arab pilgrims who survived the tragedy left Malta in part on December 9 on the S.S. *City of Oxford*, bound for Alexandria and Tangier. Another group, including Mohammed Skalli, departed in the French S.S. *General Chauzy* heading for Tunis.

The authorities placed guards round the wreck of the ill-fated ship, to prevent looting. A Belgian tug-boat also stayed close by. The agents put up the wreck and the cargo for tender, on a “no cure, no pay” basis. Giuseppe Portelli from Floriana, known as *tal-Qatiegh*, won the contract and the breakage operations started early in December. What cargo was salvaged was sold at the Marsa by public auction.

A surge of generosity followed the tragedy. *The Daily Malta Chronicle* launched the ‘Sardinia Relief Fund’, which wound up with £1345. The Church organised collections during religious services, and the education authorities did the same among school children. A spirit of solidarity emerged overwhelmingly.

Two days after the disaster, the opera *Siberia* by Luigi Illica, music by Umberto Giordano, received its premiere performance in Malta at the Manoel theatre as fund raising for the survivors. Giordano had composed the opera five years previously. Rupturously received at the time, it is now all but forgotten. The Duke and Duchess of Connaught extended their distinguished patronage to the organisers, chaired by H.E. Azarian Effenedi. “We are certain” wrote the *Malta* “that the public will not fail to turn up numerous for the spectacle, given its eminently humanitarian scope”.

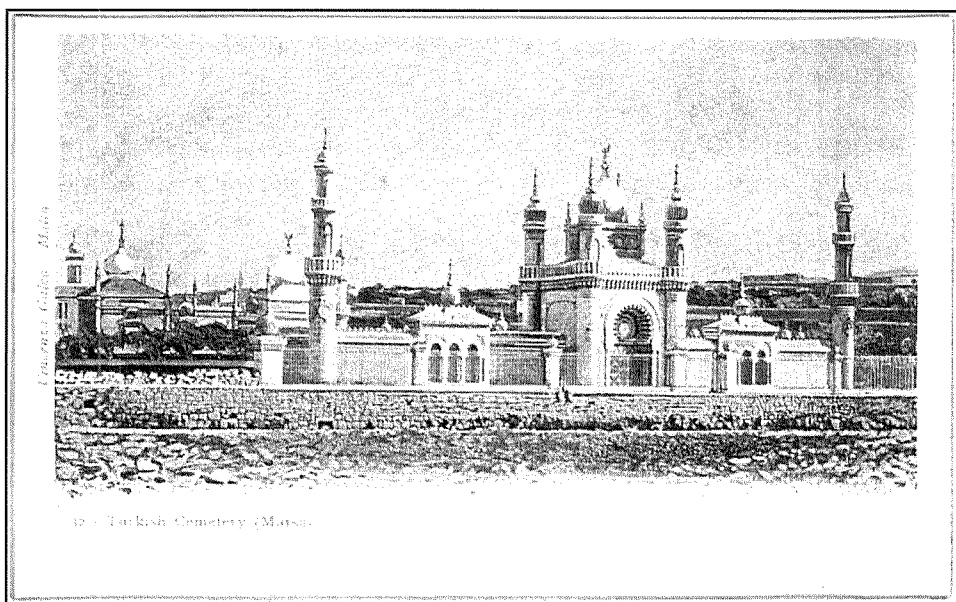
The catastrophe left behind a trail of bureaucratic problems, mostly about the registration of the deaths of so many persons, several of whom had no identifying papers. The Superintendent of Police wrote to the Lieutenant-Governor stating that usually the authorities took down the details of the deceased furnished by private medical practitioners or by medical officers of charitable institutions. In this instance the particulars “could not be known. In two cases, not even the sex of the corpses is stated”.

The law provided that when any detail could not be known, this circumstance

should be stated in the act. Did this apply when *all* the personal details were missing? Would it not be best to obtain the advice of the Director of the Public Registry and of the Crown Advocate?⁸

The Public Registry answered that it believed that when the names and surnames of the dead person were unknown “it would be quite useless to have the death registered; indeed ... the law would not allow it”.

The Crown Advocate agreed, adding however that, as for the dead members of the crew, Mr John C. Camilleri, local agent of Ellerman & Papayanni, could help in completing the acts of death. It was agreed to write to the Secretary of State to obtain the missing particulars. In some cases the information lacking referred only to the full Christian name, which, according to British practice, often appeared only as an initial in documents. Mr Camilleri complied in full.



Postcard by Vincenzo Galea, of the Turkish cemetery, Marsa, where the Moslem victims of the Sardinia fire lie buried

Michael Galea recounts how, in June 1910, the deposed Sultan of Morocco, Abd al-Aziz (died 1943) on his way to exile in Jerusalem, stopped in Malta. The young Sultan visited the Turkish cemetery, where many of the *Sardinia* victims lay in peace. “He was visibly moved as he walked round the graves”.⁹

The victims still lie there, in what has been described as “the least known, and certainly today the most important surviving 19th century Ottoman building to have been built beyond the borders of the Ottoman sultanate in the new Ottoman Islamic style ... This building is an architectural statement of great beauty, and also of

boldness and authority”.¹⁰ It is nothing short of shameful that such a masterpiece of skill and memory has been allowed to fall to neglect and ruin.

c. Giovanni Bonello, 2003

(All illustrations form the author's collection)

Acknowledgements and source

I wish to record my thanks to Ms Maroma Camilleri who helped me with the sources. This article relies heavily on The Daily Malta Chronicle (when not otherwise attributed) the Italian daily Malta, Michael Galea's feature mentioned in the text and records in the National Archives at Santu Spiritu, Rabat.

¹ Malta, November 26, 1908.

² *Ibid.*

³ *The Daily Malta Chronicle*, November 26, 1908.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Malta, *ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ National Archives, S. of. P. 4726/1908.

⁹ Michael Galea, “The Sardinia Disaster” in *The Democrat*, August 18, 25, 1990.

¹⁰ T.M.P. Duggan, “The Ottoman Taj Mahal” in *Turkish Daily News*.

MALTEX IV

10, 11 & 12 October, 2003

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