

THE KAREN GRECH CROSSES

By Giovanni Bonello LL.D.

On December 28, 1977, Karen Grech, the teenage daughter of Professor Edwin Grech, was murdered by the explosion of a letter-bomb addressed to her father. Despite the lapse of time and the change in government, no one has yet been charged with the infamous crime.

The repercussions — human, political and social — of that letter-bomb were far reaching. Tensions between the parties, already red-hot, increased. Fear, suspicion and murder added new dimensions to the local political scene; that dark menace has not been completely defused yet.

The postal authorities were quick to react to the outrage. Lethal letter-bombs, previously unheard of in Malta, had overnight become a sad reality. Something had to be done, and fast.

The first step was that all postal objects addressed to persons, or classes of persons perceived to be "at risk", were vetted for explosives and certified harmless before delivery. These included all medical doctors and surgeons, politicians and the civil and religious authorities.

The early clearance certificate consisted in a manuscript 'X' on the cover signed or initialled by one or more postal officials (Fig. 1 and 2).

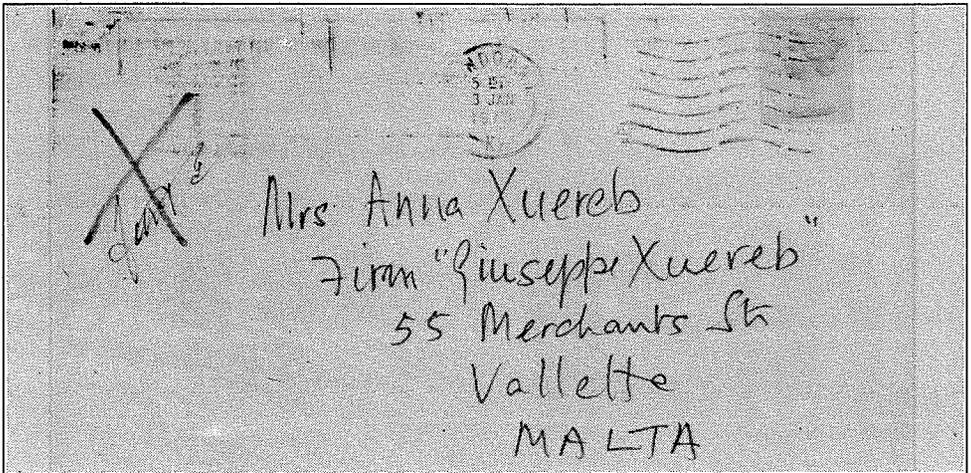


Fig. 1 An early example of bomb-scare certification, consisting of a manuscript "X" and the signature of the examining officer. Letter dated 3 January 1978, a few days after the murder of Karen Grech.

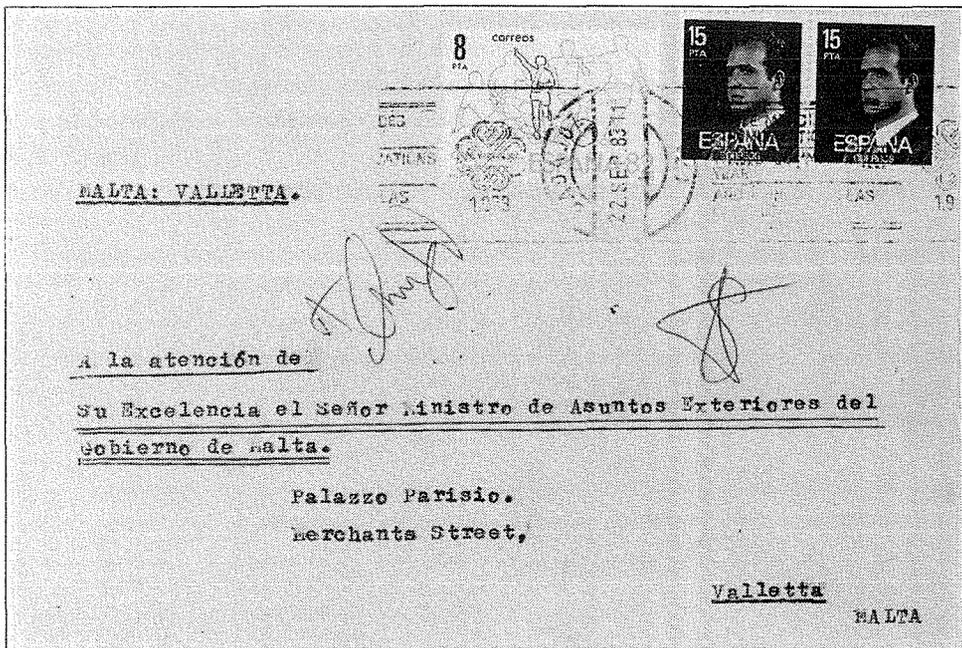


Fig. 2 Letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, before the issue of the 'X' handstamps. Certified by manuscript 'X' and two signatures.

Then, on October 5, 1984, new postal regulations (Nº 832) were published in the Government Gazette, to the effect that, in so far as internal mail was concerned, only postcards and normal envelopes clearly containing letters could be posted in mail boxes.

All other bulky items had to be handed in unsealed at a Post Office — Sub-Post Offices excluded — where the sender had to fill in a detailed form and produce his or her identity card. Articles not in accordance with those regulations were to be returned to the sender, or otherwise disposed of as the Postmaster General directed.

All post offices were, meanwhile, provided with a special handstamp, representing an 'X' (a St Andrew's cross) with the name of the post office over the 'X'. In all I have found 17, i.e., Birkirkara, Cospicua, Gzira, Hamrun, Luqa, Mosta, Msida, Paola, Qormi, Rabat, Sliema, Valletta, Zabbar, Zejtun, Zurrieq, Mgarr-Gozo and Victoria-Gozo. I am reproducing these in tabular form (Fig. 3). Maybe readers know of others.

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| BKARA X | GZIRA X | GOSPICUA X |
| HAMRUN X | LUQA X | MSIDA X |
| MOSTA X | PAOLA X | QORME X |
| RABAT X | SLIEMA X | VALLETTA X |
| ZABBAR X | ZEJTUN X | ZURRIEQ X |
| MCARR GOZO X | VICTORIA GOZO X | |

Fig. 3 'X' rubber handstamps were issued in October 1984 to all the Post Offices in Malta and Gozo. They were used on bulky letters.

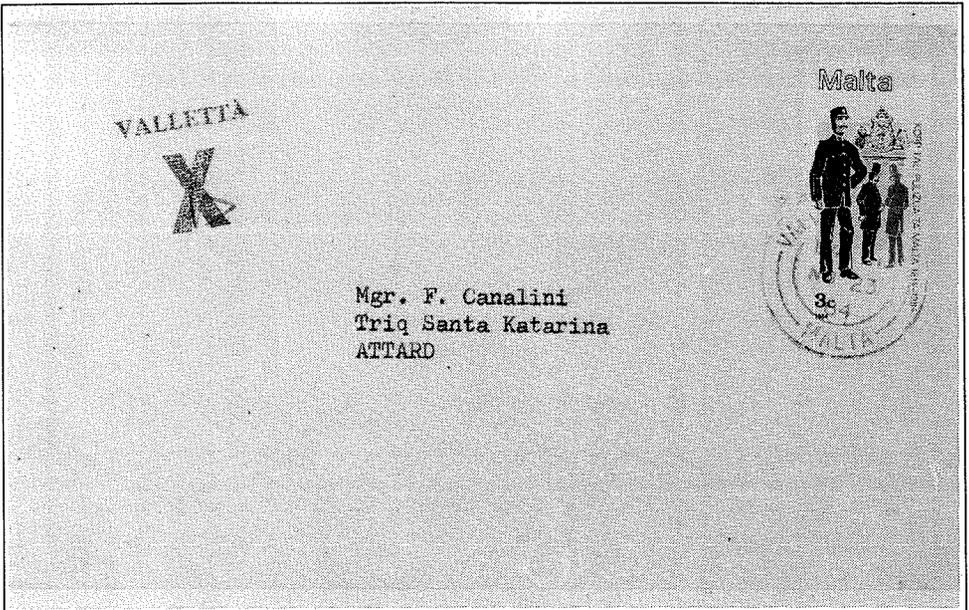
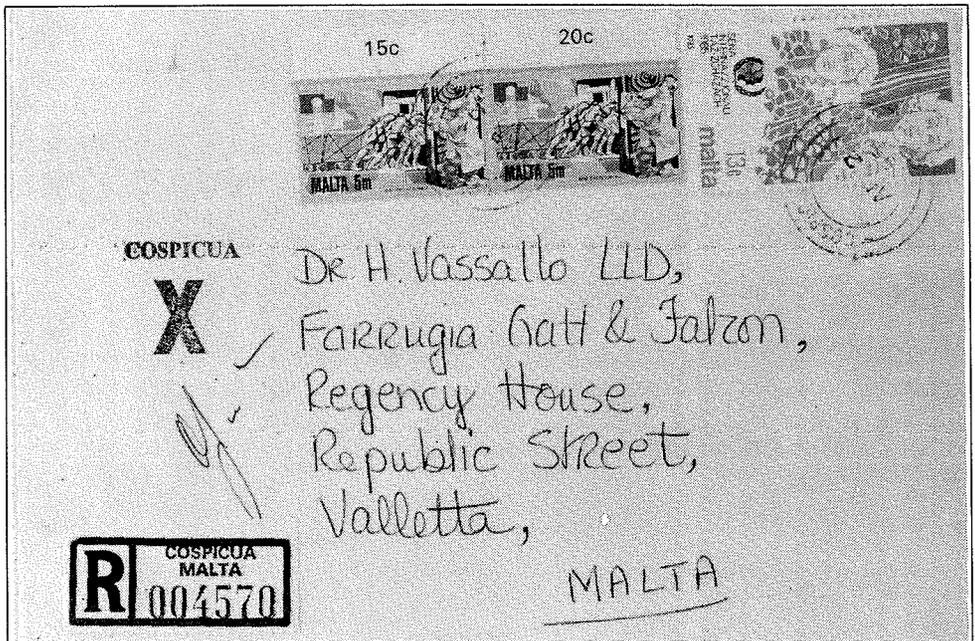


Fig. 4 A Valletta 'X' handstamp on a letter addressed to the Apostolic Nuncio on 23 November 1984.

Fig. 5 The 'X' handstamp used in the Cospicua Post Office.



Besides to the Post Offices, other 'X' handstamps were issued to certify inspection and safety. These were:

- C.M.R. (Central Mail Room)
- Delivery Branch
- D.L.O. (Dead Letter Office)
- Govt. Depts.
- G.P.O. Counter (General Post Office)
- Parcel Post
- R.L.B. (Registered Letter Branch)

I am also reproducing these in tabular form (Fig. 6). If readers know of others, I would be interested to list them.

| | | |
|------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| C.M.R. X | DELIVERY BRANCH X | D.L.O. X |
| GOVT. DEPT. X | X GOVT. DEPT'S | G.P.O. COUNTER X |
| PARCEL POST X | R.L.B. X | |

Fig. 6 Other 'X' handstamps used by Postal branches and government departments.

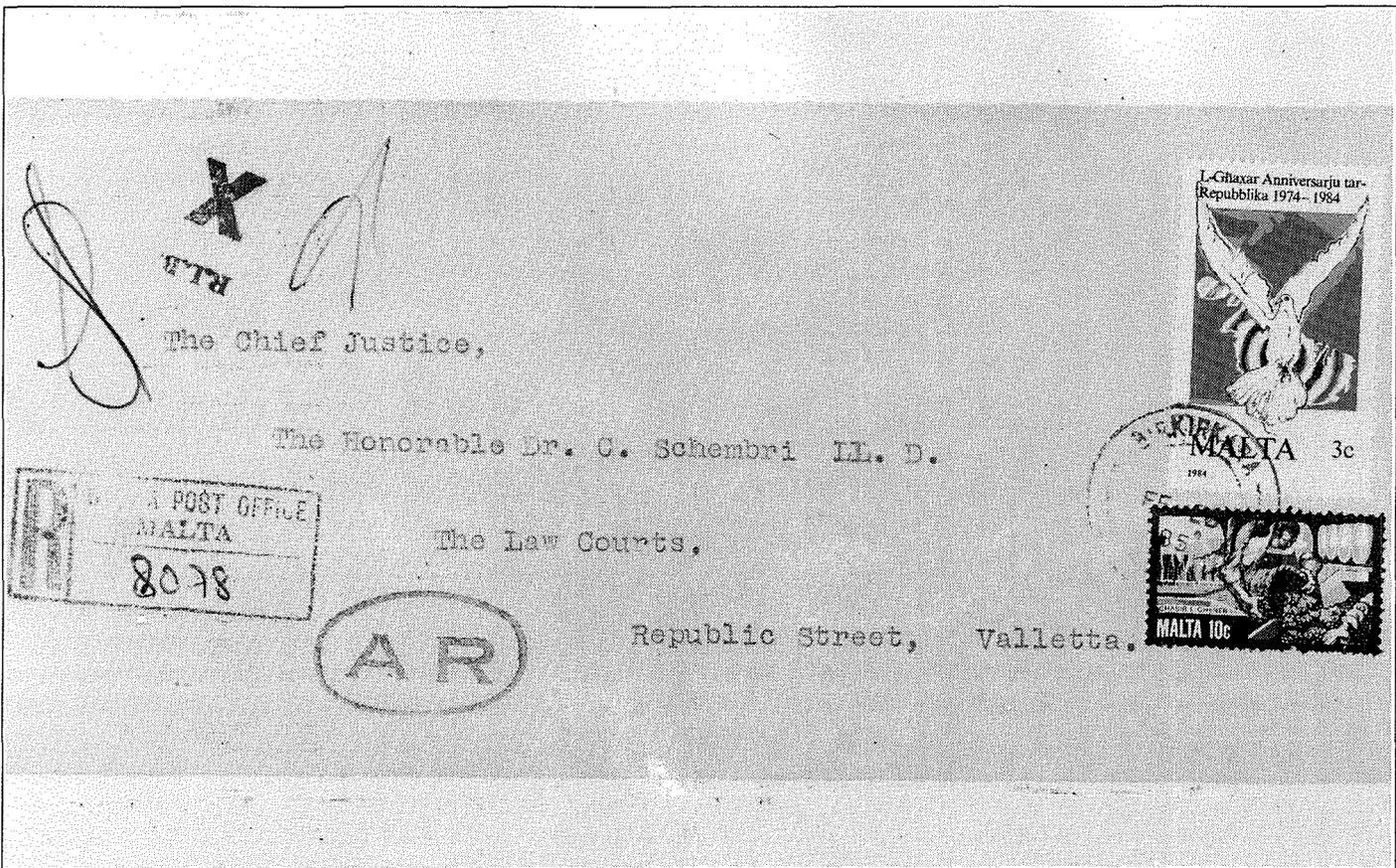


Fig. 7 A registered A.R. letter to the Chief Justice, certified harmless by the Registered Letter Branch.

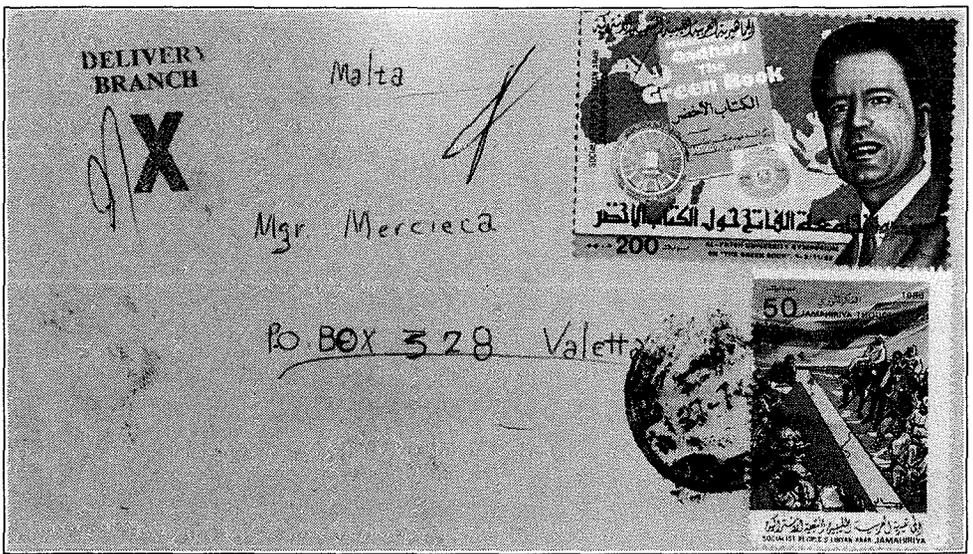


Fig. 8 A letter from Libya addressed to His Grace the Archbishop, certified free from explosives by the Delivery Branch.

The Karen Grech crosses vary considerably in size and thickness. Some (e.g. Zejtun) have been seen in violet; others (e.g. C.M.R., R.L.B.) are occasionally red, even when the postal object is not registered.

As can be imagined, handing in every bulky letter at the Post Offices caused great inconveniences. Occasionally it took hours to fill in the forms, queue up at a counter, assist at the examination of the contents and obtain the 'X' cross before the letter could be inserted in the postal stream.

No one denied the utility of the precautions, but articles in the press (e.g. *In-Taghna*, November 27, 1984) ridiculed the bureaucracy and the double payment of postage when the bulky letter, posted in a mail box, was returned to sender, but with stamps cancelled.

The invasion of privacy was also regretted. Bulky letters were seen by post office clerks before posting, or were opened when found in mail boxes. Diplomatic missions, it was said, resented these intrusions against the code of confidentiality.

For the purpose of returned bulky letters posted in contravention of the inspection regulations, special handstamps were issued: "Not in accordance with

posting conditions". Presumably, every Post Office was issued with one. I am publishing three different specimens. (Fig. 9).

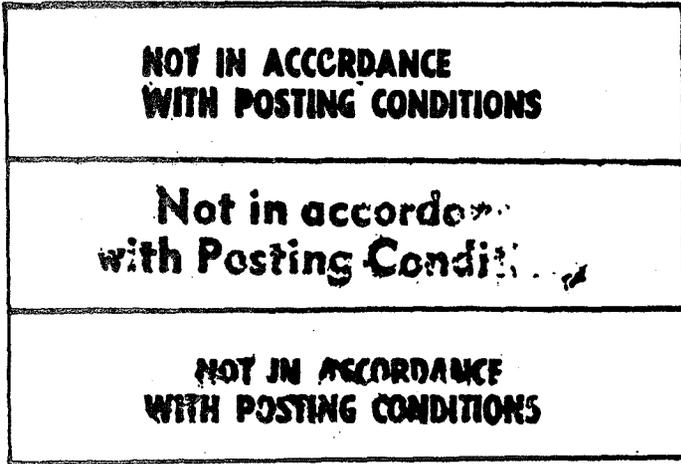
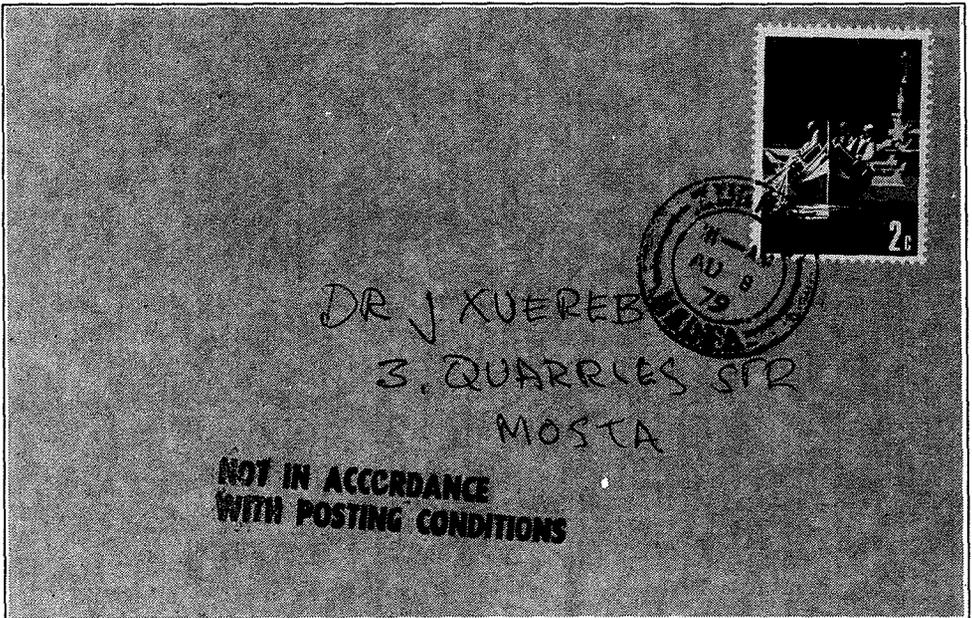
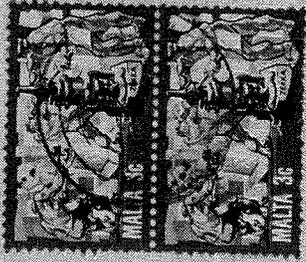


Fig. 9 Three samples of the instructional handstamp issued to reject bulky letters which had been posted directly in mail boxes.

Fig. 10 Part of wrapper with handstamp "Not in accordance with postal regulations" in use after the letter-bomb murder.





*Mr Heloise Vincents
188, Nam Pt's
St Julians*

**Not in accordance
with Posting Conditions**

Fig. 11 Another type of the same handstamp used on returned mail.

The practice of handing in bulky envelopes at Post Office counters, gradually fell into disuse and has, for some years now, been discontinued. Not so the verification of letters addressed to certain persons. The 'X' certification is still to be found on correspondence addressed to Ministers and other classes of professionals in the public eye. This is still sporadically current today.

On the 10th January, 1978 the Postmaster General sent the following letter to members of Parliament and Doctors of Medicine.

2891/P/77

Department of Posts
Auberge d'Italie
Merchants Street,
Valletta

10th January, 1978

Dear Sir/Madam

This is to inform you that as part of the precautions being taken by this Department following the sending of two letter-bombs through the post, all mail addressed to Members of Parliament and doctors of medicine is being handed by postmen to an adult member of the household and not delivered through the letter-box.

Any mail found in private letter boxes or posted through any slot for the purpose is, therefore, to be considered as suspect until further notice.

Yours faithfully,



GW Borg
Postmaster General.

Karen Grech paid with her young life for some obtuse hate, but her martyrdom is not forgotten. The new maternity wing of St Luke's Hospital bears her name, and, in hundreds years' time, the Karen Grech crosses will keep her memory alive throughout the world of postal historians.