

A TOUR OF THE LAZZARETTO BUILDINGS

PAUL CASSAR

The history of civilisation is punctuated by the sudden appearance of widespread and fatal epidemics and the efforts of bewildered and helpless communities to stem these onslaughts of acute communicable diseases.

One of the factors responsible for these disasters was the uncontrolled movement of infected persons from place to place; indeed, until the very recent past, the traveller carried serious medical risks not only to himself but also to the community which received him as a potential agent of fatal infectious illness such as plague, smallpox and cholera among his hosts.

To counteract such a threat several Mediterranean ports devised the system of quarantine by which passengers arriving on ships from infected countries were not allowed to enter into free communication with the inhabitants before spending a number of days, originally fixed at forty (hence the term *quarantena*), in an isolated building known as *lazzaretto*.⁽¹⁾

The word *lazzaretto* initially denoted an institution for the exclusive care and segregation of lepers who were regarded as 'objects' of special concern to St Lazarus but it was eventually applied to all places reserved for the isolation of persons affected with infectious illness with the aim of protecting the health of the rest of the community. As early as 1423 a *lazzaretto* was set up for travellers at Venice.

In Malta there were two establishments associated with the enforcement of quarantine. One was at Valletta, on that part of the wharf of the Grand harbour known as *il barriera* from the Italian word meaning a 'barrier', the allusion being to an arrangement of railings which allowed persons undergoing quarantine to talk to the inhabitants but prevented them from coming in close physical contact with the latter. The other establishment was the *lazzaretto* on Manoel Island and, occasionally, the nearby Fort Manoel. The *lazzaretto* was a complex of buildings and cemeteries with an extensive frontage towards the sea facing Valletta across Marsamxett Harbour. It was erected at various intervals, according to the exigencies of the times, over a stretch of three hundred years so that the oldest surviving structure dates back to 1643. However, Manoel Island has been associated with the quarantine system of Malta since at least four hundred years. In fact it was since 1526 that that part of Marsamxett Harbour near the Bishop's Islet (as Manoel Island was then called) was used as the Quarantine Harbour of Malta.⁽²⁾

1. D. Panzac, *Quarantanes et lazarets* (Aix-en-Provence, 1986).
2. P. Cassar, *Medical History of Malta* (London, 1965), 286; G. Galea, "The Quarantine Service and the Lazzaretto of Malta", *Melita Historica*, Vol.IV (1966), 184.

A temporary *lazzaretto* was set up on the Islet during the plague epidemic of 1592-3 for the reception of nine hundred patients. A few more durable structures were also built including warehouses and a small chapel dedicated to St Roche, the saint protector of the plague-stricken. Nothing now remains of these buildings which had probably been demolished in the late eighteenth century when the warehouses of Grand Master Emanuel de Rohan were erected on this site in 1797.

The oldest extant structure of the *lazzaretto* as we know it to day, dates since 1643 when fear of an invasion of pestilence then prevalent in various Mediterranean ports, promoted Grand Master Jean Paul Lascaris to build a permanent *lazzaretto*. The decision was approved by the Council of the Order of St John on the 17 July. As the Islet then belonged to the Cathedral of Mdina, it was acquired by the Order's government from the Cathedral Chapter by exchanging it for some of the Order's property at *Tal Fiddien*.

The building of Lascaris is known as *Il Palazz* or *Palazzo Vecchio* or *Palazzo Grande*. It consists of two floors with eight halls on each floor surrounding a large central quadrangular courtyard to which access was made through a wide portal facing the sea. On top of this portal was fixed a marble tablet (22cm x 35cm) with this inscription in Italian:-

CHI ARDISCE DI MAR
CARE O GUASTARE
LE MURA IN LAZZA -
RETTO FARRA QUA -
RANTENA DOPPIA

(Whoever dares to mark or disfigure the walls in the *lazzaretto* will undergo a double quarantine).

The façade originally had three coats-of-arms carved in stone. It is not possible today to identify them as they were effaced probably by the French during their brief occupation (1798-1800). This part of the façade of the Old Palace is partly hidden from view by a series of arcades forming a portico along the whole length of the façade.

The first floor of the Palace is approached from the central courtyard by a wide imposing stairway which leads to an open balcony supported by large stone brackets and which runs along the four sides of the yard. High up on the wall facing you as you enter the yard there is a sundial, beneath which lie the remains of three erased coats-of-arms which were probably obliterated at the same time as the ones already mentioned on the external façade. Beneath the central coat-of-arms there is an oblong hollow which up to the late sixties of this century contained the following marble inscription (80cm x 35cm):-

RITORNANDO DA TRIPOLI DI BARBERIA CARLO CRISTIANO
 DE HOLCK COMD^{TE} IL BRICK SARPEN DI S.M. DANESE
 FECE LA SUA 40^{NA} DI 38 GIORNI IN COMPAGNIA
 DEI SIG^R TEN^{TE} GIOI MUMK
 TEN^{TE} EM^{LE} KRIEGER
 TEN^{TE} WOLLGANNO KAAS
 COMISS^O GABRIELE HETTING
 DOTTOR MARCO KLAUSEN
 IN RICONOSCIMENTO DE PIACERI ED ACCOGLIENZE
 RICEVUTE IN QUESTO LAZZARETTO COMPROMETTENDOSI
 L'AMICIZIA IN SEGNO DI GRATITUDINE FECE PORRE
 QUEST' IMORTAL MARMO VALLETTA A 10 8^B 1797.

(On his return from Tripoli on the Barbary coast, Charles Christian De Holck, Commanding His Danish Majesty's Brig *Sarpen*, performed his quarantine of 38 days together with Lieut. John Mumk, Lieut. Emanuel Krieger, Lieut. Wolfgang Kaas, Commissar Gabriel Hetting and Doctor Mark Klausen. In acknowledgement of the kindness, courtesy and friendship extended to them in this lazaretto he set up this enduring marble tablet as a sign of his gratitude. Valletta 10 October 1797).

On the opposite wall, at about the same level of the first floor, there is another oblong hollow above the lintel of the central door, which contained the following inscription on a marble slab measuring 55cm X 23cm :-

VINCENZO UGO CAVALIERE GEROSOLEMITANO
 DI ANNI 26 NATO IN PALERMO IN SICILIA
 DOPPO IL SUO VIAGGIO NEL ARCIPELAGO
 IN COSTANTINOPOLI NEL ASIA MINORE
 IN SORIA NEL EGITTO E NELLA
 BARBERIA FECE QUI LA SUA
 CONTUMACIA NEL MESE DI
 FEBBRAIO L'ANNO 1787.

(Vincent Ugo, Knight of the Order of St John of Jerusalem, 26 years old, born in Palermo, Sicily, performed his quarantine here in February 1787 after his voyage in the Archipelago, Constantinople, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and the Barbary Coast).⁽³⁾

The halls have an arched ceiling and are so spacious that, when unoccupied, one such room made 'an excellent tennis court' for the traveller George Waring who was at the *lazaretto* in December 1833.⁽⁴⁾

When the Rev. John Henry Newman arrived in Malta on the 10 January 1833 from Corfu and Patras, he spent fourteen days quarantine in the *Palazzo Grande*.⁽⁵⁾ He stated that all the windows of his apartment were casements entirely open so that,

3. These tablets were preserved in the office of the Medical Officer in charge of the *lazaretto*.

4. Cassar, 304.

5. NLM, Lib.810.

in fact, he was 'sitting in the open air'. He added that one of the windows opened 'upon the chimney of the baking-room for letters', i.e. the office where letters were disinfected by smoking or fumigation before being taken out of the *lazzaretto* for delivery. Thanks to this detail provided by Newman we can identify, with reasonable certainty, the apartment which he occupied. This was still extant in 1970 except for its arched ceiling which was destroyed during the last war and replaced by a roof of corrugated iron.

Passengers detained in quarantine were allowed, with due precautions, to leave their apartments and spend some hours in the open air on two terraces on the first floor. Here these travellers have cut numerous *graffiti* or carvings in the soft stone of the walls in spite of the warning given by the inscription over the portal. These carvings are of 'all nations, tastes and languages'. Besides names, dates, specified periods of quarantine and prayers, there are also 'emblems of anchors, flags, ships, crosses' and sacred initials. 'They show', in the words of one who was detained at the *lazzaretto* during the early nineteenth century, 'the hours of listlessness and ennui passed by others who have preceded me'.⁽⁶⁾ The earliest carving is dated 1681, the most recent 1947.

The Old Palace contains another inscription on a large marble tablet let into the western corner of its external façade. It records the pardon from the death penalty of a Health Guardian, Felice Camilleri, in 1814. The inscription, written in Italian, was originally fixed on one of the two stone pillars of the gallows which stood on the foreshore of Manoel Island in a conspicuous position almost in front of the ascent which leads to Fort Manoel. The gallows, which served as a reminder of the fate awaiting those found guilty of breaches of quarantine rules, was demolished in 1839. The original tablet is now in storage at the National Museum, Valletta. The tablet at the *lazzaretto* is a copy. Freely rendered into English it reads:

This gallows was erected
on 26 March 1814
for the execution of
Felix Camilleri
one of the *lazzaretto* watchmen
who was condemned to death for having openly broken
the quarantine laws
but
who received a full pardon from H.E. the Governor
on behalf of His Majesty having been the first criminal
sentenced to the penalty of death after the sovereignty
of these islands was assumed
by H.R.H the Prince Regent
in the name and on the part
of the King.⁽⁷⁾

6. A. Bigelow, *Travels in Malta and Sicily* (Boston, 1831), 106-110.

7. G.H. Evans, *A Guide to Malta and Gozo* (Malta, 1900), 21.

During the next hundred years following the erection of Lascaris' building, the *lazzaretto* was improved and enlarged at different times by Grandmasters, Nicholas Cotoner in 1670, Gregorio Caraffa in 1683, Raimondo Perellos y Roccaful in 1701 and Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. These extensions are represented by the block, to the east of Lascaris building, known as the New Palace. A series of high arches runs along the façade overlooking the sea. The ground floor consists of two courtyards and large warehouses with arched ceiling which were originally meant for the 'ventilation and purification' of merchandise before it was allowed into the island or trans-shipped to other ports. This purification consisted in the unpacking of goods and exposing them to air for thirty-five days. They were then repacked and re-embarked on lighters at one of the wharfs of the *lazzaretto* and sent to their destination. The clothes and baggage of passengers were submitted to the same process of airing.⁽⁸⁾

One of these warehouses, in the easternmost end of the block, was damaged during the Second World War and subsequently demolished with the overlying apartments as they were judged unsafe.

The first floor of the New Palace consisted of a series of small rooms for the accommodation of passengers in quarantine. During the cholera epidemic of 1865 these were equipped by the Chief Police Physician, Dr. Antonio Ghio, for the isolation of patients suffering from this disease and the New Palace became known as Ghio's Hospital.

At the rear of the first floor there is a second floor made up of a number of small rooms for the accommodation of passengers.

Grand Master Manoel de Vilhena, besides providing additional extensions, was also responsible for the construction of a number of cattle sheds and courtyards with stone troughs for the quarantining of animals. On the first floor of the cattle sheds, rooms were built for the storage of fodder and lodging the cattle-men. These sheds and courtyards, which were situated towards the westernmost end of the *lazzaretto* complex, were completely destroyed during the Second World War by air bombardment.

At about the same period of the construction of these cattle sheds (i.e. before 1726), a small plague hospital - known as the Old Plague Hospital or Pest House - was erected for the treatment in isolation of patients landed from ships and suffering from plague. It lay by the sea-shore towards the western side. It was still in existence in 1865.⁽⁹⁾ Its site was partially occupied later by the Disinfection Station.

A new block was erected between the Old Plague Hospital and the Old Palace during the grandmastership of Emanuel de Rohan. It was completed in 1797, which

8. Cassar, 296., NLM, Lib.19,f.122^v.

9. Cassar, 307.

year is carved beneath a small cross on the keystone of one of the portals of the building. The block became known as the De Rohan Block. The ground floor is taken up by large courtyards and stores; the first floor had apartments for passengers and was approached by three open stairways constructed like flying buttresses of which only one remains, the others having been destroyed during the last war.⁽¹⁰⁾

High up on the façade are the remains of architectural ornaments which probably formed part of coats-of-arms or trophies.

During the cholera epidemic of 1865 the first floor was turned into a hospital; it was similarly used as recently as 1937 during the plague epidemic of that year.

An interesting aspect of the old Quarantine System was the disinfection, as then understood, of letters from overseas. Arrangements for this procedure were already in existence in Malta by 1678 when letters were 'smoked' or 'perfumed' after being slit in a few places to allow the free entry of the fumes inside them (1749). This method was employed at the Quarantine Station at the *Barriera* of Valletta. It is not known when it was first applied at the *lazzaretto* but there is no doubt that a so-called Profum Office or *Stanza Profumo* was in operation at the *lazzaretto* by 1812. Even the Bills of Health from ships were disinfected and in 1820 the Captain of the *lazzaretto* was instructed to carry in his boat a bucket with vinegar, a fumigating box and a pair of iron tongs for receiving the Bills without touching them with his hands.⁽¹¹⁾

The Profum Office occupied the triangular space between the De Rohan Block and the Old Palace. It was a two storey structure, the ground floor consisting of a large outer room which led into a smaller one and a yard. At the back of these was the room containing the fumigating cupboards. This room was arch-shaped and was about six meters long. In the thickness of the walls there were six cupboards provided with doors that closed hermetically. They had two wooden shelves in the form of a grille on which the letters to be disinfected were placed by means of tongs. Underneath was an iron vessel containing the ingredients for the *profumo*. Two types of ingredients were used—powdered sulphur poured over lighted straw and a mixture of sulphuric acid, manganese, common salt and water. The first method was applied to postal matter coming from places infected with plague, the other was used for correspondence from ports with other forms of 'contagion'. Paper money was treated in the same manner; coins were dipped in a receptacle containing vinegar and, after a few minutes' immersion, were allowed in circulation.⁽¹²⁾

Towards 1816 letters disinfected at the *lazzaretto* were given a wax seal impressed with an anchor in the centre and the words SANITA DI MALTA round the margin; or else the British Royal cypher with the inscription QUARANTINE OFFICE MALTA.

10. A. Ghio, *The Cholera in Malta and Gozo in the Year 1865* (Malta, 1867), 22-23.

11. J. Hennen, *Sketches of the Medical Topography of the Mediterranean*, (London, 1830), 489. P. Cassar, 'Slitting of Letters for Disinfection in the 18th century in Malta,' *British Medical Journal*, 14 January 1967, 105-6.

12. G. Bussolin, *Delle istituzioni di sanità marittima* (Trieste, 1881), 343-4.

Later on, about 1837, the letters were stamped in French with the words PURIFIÉ AU LAZARET - MALTE. Towards the end of the century this post mark appeared in English with the phrases DISINFECTED LAZZARETTO MALTA with the date across the middle. The disinfection of letters from abroad, as a routine procedure, came to an end in the 1880s but it was resorted to, as an exceptional measure, in 1929. That year there was an epidemic of plague in Tunis and all correspondence from that country was disinfected at the *lazzaretto* by exposure to the fumes of formalin. However, as late as 1936, the letters written by patients under treatment at the *lazzaretto* were still being disinfected by exposure to the vapours of sulphur for twenty-four hours after the four corners of the envelope were cut off to allow the free circulation of the sulphur fumes inside the envelope.

Today only the site of the Profum Office can be identified as the building was completely destroyed during the last war.

All the old buildings were surrounded on the landside by a triple line of high walls to prevent persons under quarantine from escaping from the *lazzaretto* but in spite of these boundary walls escape did occur. In 1725 for instance, a number of slaves got away after stangling their guardian; in 1810 some French prisoners of war escaped from the Old Palace apparently through the windows, as the Captian of the *lazzaretto* very soon afterwards requested that the windows be provided with iron bars.⁽¹³⁾

By the first decade of the nineteenth century, the *lazzaretto* complex comprised no less than 185 rooms and magazines. Following the plague of 1813 a very extensive area was enclosed by solid stone walls within which many hundred persons could be encamped in the event of another outbreak of this disease.⁽¹⁴⁾ Indeed, the terror of plague persisted for so many years that a New Plague Hospital - also known as Manoel Hospital - was erected in 1837-8 towards the west end of the islet. It was a rectangular building (66m long and 48m broad) with its front facing the sea. It had two floors, with a large yard at the back, capable of accommodating forty patients.

The New Plague Hospital was later converted into Married Quarters for the British troops, but in 1865 it was re-opened as a hospital for the treatment of infectious cases both among the inhabitants and among passengers and crews. In 1871 it was used for the reception of smallpox patients and became known as Smallpox Hospital (*Sptar tal Ġidri*). Of this building only the central part survived the heavy air bombing of the Second World War. It was later reconditioned to serve as the residence of the Medical Officer in charge of the *lazzaretto*.

Cemetries

There were six cemetries, at different periods of time, associated with the *lazzaretto*:-

(i) The burial ground of St Roche, possibly contemporaneous with the erection of the *Palazzo Grande* (1643). It occupied the site of the De Rohan Block. No vestiges of it remain.

13. NLM, *Lib.845*.

14. Hennen, 489.

- (ii) One behind the Old Plague Hospital which was certainly in existence between 1726 and 1881.
- (iii) Another one was inside the ditch formed by the space between the inner boundary wall of the *lazzaretto* and the rear of the New Palace. The earliest reference to this graveyard that I have come across belongs to 1731. It was demolished in 1838.
- (iv) The so-called Lazzaretto Cemetery which adjoined the New Plague Hospital. It appears to have been constructed about the mid-nineteenth century and was still in use until the outbreak of the Second World War when it was destroyed, with its chapel, by air bombardment.
- (v) The Moslem Cemetery which was already in use in 1724 but cannot be now located.
- (vi) St George's or *Tal Hofra* Cemetery which survived until recent times. It was set up in 1802 for the burials of non-Catholic seamen, soldiers and other 'subjects of His [Britannic] Majesty'. In later years the cemetery was partitioned onto two sections, one of which was reserved for Catholics. A chapel, dedicated to St George, and a few tombstones stood on the site until 1970. These slabs are of interest because of the personal and medical histories they give of the individuals lying in peace beneath them. Some of these tombstones are now preserved at the erstwhile Santo Spirito Hospital at Rabat (Malta). Here are a few of the inscriptions on the graveslabs:-

SOTTO QUESTA TOMBA
 RIPOSA FORTUNATO BORG
 D'ANNI 43 COMANDANTE IL BRIG
 INGLESE PONSONBY PROVENIENTE DA
 ALESSANDRA QUALE CESSO' DI VIVERE IN
 QUESTO LAZZARETTO IL 5 GENNAIO 1840.

(Here rests Fortunato Borg, 43 years old, commanding the British brig *Ponsonby*, arriving from Alexandria. He died in this *lazzaretto* on the 5 January 1840).

SACRED TO THE MEMORY
 OF DOCTOR PYM WEEKES
 LATE PRESIDENT
 MEDICAL BOARD AT BOMBAY
 WHO DIED
⁽¹⁵⁾
 IN MEMORY OF
 ANNE FLYNN
 WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE
 ON THE 1st AUGUST 1839
 AT FORT MANOEL
 WHILE PERFORMING QUARANTINE
 ON HER WAY TO ENGLAND
 FROM A TOUR IN THE HOLY LAND
 SHE WAS MOST KIND HONEST
 GOOD TEMPERED AND STRICTLY WELL
 DISPOSED BOTH AS TO HER RELIGION
 AND MORALS
 THIS TABLET WAS ERECTED AS A MARK
 OF ESTEEM FOR HER FAITHFUL SERVICES
 BY SIR MOSES AND LADY MONTEFIORE.

15. missing.

Sir Moses Montefiore (1784-1885) was a British Jewish merchant and philanthropist of Italian descent. After amassing a fortune, he retired from business and dedicated himself to the service of the Jewish race in England and abroad. In 1837 he was knighted by Queen Victoria. He went to the Levant in 1839 with a scheme for planting Jewish colonies in Syria but the project fell through. He intervened on behalf of the Jews with the Czar, the King of France and the Pope. He died at the age of 101 years.

Lady Montefiore was known for her beauty, her generosity and refinement of mind. She was her husband's inseparable companion in wanderings. She and her husband passed through the Malta *lazzaretto* during their travels to the Middle East.

Health Office and Chapel of St Roche at Valletta.

The *lazzaretto* extended administratively across Marsamxett harbour to the opposite shores of Valletta. As you descended through Marsamxett Gate there was on your left on the foreshore the Health Office where the administrative officers of the *lazzaretto* conducted the business of the establishment. Communication with the *lazzaretto* on Manoel Island was by boat.

The ground floor of the Health Office was a speaking-place or *parlatorio* where, under proper restrictions, conversation was permitted between the inhabitants on one side of a barrier and the passengers and crews in quarantine on the other side, in such a way that they could not touch one another.⁽¹⁶⁾ A few magazines were attached to the Health Office. In 1799 they were used as hiding places by the Maltese insurgents against the French in their abortive attempt to enter Valletta and capture it from the French troops during the night of 12 January.

Also on the Valletta side stood the Chapel of St Roche perched on the edge of St Michael bastion fronting the *lazzaretto* across the water. This chapel was erected in 1643 for the celebration of Mass for the inmates and employees of the *lazzaretto*. The beginning of the Mass was announced by the toll of a bell from the chapel. The Catholics at the *lazzaretto* would then turn their faces towards the chapel and follow, in their imagination, the various stages of the Mass. This religious function was still being observed until the outbreak of the Second World War. The chapel was demolished during this conflict by air bombardment. Only a few vestiges of masonry now remain on the site.

Distinguished visitors

The *lazzaretto* as a sanitary institution, has played a conspicuous part not only in the medical history of Malta but also in the military and political events of the Mediterranean during the past century. A few instances will suffice. During the years of the Italian *Risorgimento* it received many sick Italian refugees who were fleeing their country for reasons of political persecution and who were seeking asylum in Malta.⁽¹⁷⁾

16. Hennen, 489

17. V. Bonello, *Echi del Risorgimento a Malta* (Malta, 1963), *passim*.

During the Crimean War the *lazzaretto* opened its doors not only to British servicemen but also to French soldiers and the Italian troops forming the Anglo-Italian Legion. Each of these contingents had its own distinct hospital within the *lazzaretto* complex and many of the men who succumbed to typhus, dysentery and scurvy found their last resting place in the *lazzaretto* graveyards. The quarantine regulations applied also to distinguished visitors to Malta. These too had to undergo quarantine before they were allowed to tour the island.

Lord Byron, during his second sojourn in Malta in 1811, called forth a bitter *Adieu* to Malta in which he vented his chagrin for everything Maltese not excluding the *lazzaretto*:-

Adieu, thou damndest quarantine
That gave me fever and the spleen.

His name is carved among the *graffiti* on one of the terraces of the *lazzaretto*

When Sir Walter Scott reached Malta in November 1831, a quarantine was in force on all passengers arriving from England where cholera was then raging. Scott's quarantine was fixed at nine days and he was allowed to undergo it, together with his family, in the nearby Fort Manoel. He was permitted to have visitors but he was obliged to remain behind a stout bar which kept him at the prescribed distance from them.

The novelist William Thackeray spent seventeen days in quarantine at Fort Manoel when he came to Malta in November 1844. In his characteristic satirical strain he described the Fort as the place 'where government accommodates you with quarters; where the authorities are so attentive as to scent your letters with aromatic vinegar before you receive them and so careful of your health as to lock you in your room every night lest you should walk in your sleep and so over the battlements into the sea; if you escaped drowning in the sea the sentries on the opposite shore would fire at you, hence the nature of the precaution'.⁽¹⁸⁾ That the danger of being shot at by the quarantine guards was a very real one is shown by the fate that befell a Neapolitan officer in 1817. He was in charge of a flotilla of fishing boats moored in the quarantine harbour. Once, while inspecting these boats at sunset - which was against the quarantine regulations - he was shot at by the guard and killed.

A British traveller in 1851 was relieved to discover that 'the greater part of the nuisances complained of in Lazarettos do not apply to Malta... There you have neither bad food, bad lodgings, bad company nor vermin... Our apartment consisted of a spacious sitting room and bedrooms but slightly furnished, it is true, but with permission to adorn them at our expense'.⁽¹⁹⁾

18. W.M. Thackeray, *Burlesques* (London, 1903), 269.

19. J. Beldam, *Recollections of Scenes and Institutions in Italy and the East* (London, 1851), 305.

The Rev. (later Cardinal) John Henry Newman, while at the *lazzaretto* in 1833, hired a violin which sounded 'grand' in his spacious apartment. He also composed a few short poems and studied Italian.

It appears that the *lazzaretto* was haunted in Newman's time for on a few nights he had 'mysterious night visitants' and was awakened by strange noises. One night he sat up in his bed ready to spring out and having waited for a considerable time he caught a very bad cold. Poltergeist phenomena were alleged to have occurred some years earlier when a Health Guardian and his family had his bedding, clothes and other objects destroyed by weird night visitors. The guardian's story created such a sensation that 'it infected all the other guardians with an apprehension of spirits'. The Superintendent of the *lazzaretto* reported to the Chief Secretary to Government that the whole affair was an imposture but the guardian persisted in his story and went so far as to have a drawing made of the visitation of spirits which he exhibited in the streets for the purpose of collecting money for the celebration of Masses to be said for the repose of the troubled spirits. This gesture, however, far from winning over the Superintendent to the belief in poltergeist occurrences exasperated him to such an extent that he insisted on the man's removal from the *lazzaretto*.⁽²⁰⁾

The French painter Horace Vernet spent his time at the *lazzaretto* in March 1840 working on a painting with a biblical subject.⁽²¹⁾

Benjamin Disraeli, before he became Prime Minister, came to Malta in 1830 and was lodged in quarantine about which he wrote: 'I am imprisoned in a vast and solitary building and shunned by all my fellow creatures'.⁽²²⁾

In 1832 Alphonse de Lamartine arrived in Malta. The prescribed period of quarantine at that time was ten days but it was reduced to three for him by the Council of Health.⁽²³⁾

An American, visiting Malta in 1827, regarded quarantine as a vexatious imposition and a stay at the *lazzaretto* as a form of imprisonment. However, this enforced detention had its bright side for he found solace in the guitar music of a fellow passenger and the 'merrier concert of swallows twittering under the old eaves' where they had their nests; and also in the welcome present from the attendant or guard of a 'bunch of flowers comprising a beautiful variety of blossoms of the season - geraniums, roses, violets and carnations'.⁽²⁴⁾

20. Cassar, *Medical History*, 304.

21. P.Cassar, 'The Beginnings of Photography in Malta,' *Sunday Times of Malta*, 6 May 1962.

22. *Daily Malta Chronicle*, 25 April 1931.

23. H. Curmi, 'Malta in 1832. Alphonse de Lamartine's Visit,' *Archivum Melitense*, Vol.II (1912-3), 87.

24. Bigelow, 106-110.

Envoy

The existence of a *lazzaretto* and a quarantine organization in any country constituted an index of its high degree of civilization in so far as it reflected the extent of its commercial activities and the state's concern with the well-being of the individual and society by protecting them from exposure to communicable diseases. It also mirrored the progress of public health legislation and the political maturity of its statesmen through their co-operation with other nations in matters affecting common interests by relaying information on the health conditions of neighbouring ports and by maintaining postal communications free from the hazards of infectious illness, by means of paper, from one country to another.

Such has been the role of Malta's quarantine system, exercised during the last four hundred years, through the *lazzaretto*, which represented tangible evidence of the high medical, social, political, legal and commercial advancement attained by the Maltese people. The *lazzaretto* deserves our appreciation and the maximum of effort to preserve and repair what the ravages of war and time have spared and to protect that heritage from the insensitive materialistic mentality of our age.

I have been publicly pleading for the preservation and restoration of the *lazzaretto* complex since 1970 when I gave a public lecture on the subject, under the auspices of the University of Malta, to *Din l-Art Helwa* on 21 May. This talk was inspired by the announcement by the government of the time of a project to develop Manoel Island into a yacht marina and to provide a large hotel with the usual amenities (*Times of Malta*, 27 November, 1969, p.11.; *Ir-Review* 20 December, 1969, p.4; *Malta today* Vol. V, January, 1970, p.6). Other talks followed at varying intervals, the latest being on 14 March 1985 to the Byron Society and on 8 April of the same year to the Philatelic Society. When the conversion of Manoel Island into a tourist complex was again proposed in December 1986, I appealed in the press for the preservation of the structural characteristics and identity of the various buildings that had survived the damages of war and neglect (*The Times*, 9 January, 1987, and 1 May, 1987. Among the responses to these appeals, one came from my friend and fellow-labourer Mr Mario Buhagiar B.A.Hons.(Lond), M.Phil. (Lond) who invited me to turn my lecture notes into a paper for publication in *Melita Historica* after observing that the present time was ripe for such a step. I thank him for his idea and encouragement.