

THE MELITA 3d. POSTAGE INVERTED POLITICS EMBROIL PHILATELY

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One of the most well-known varieties of Malta stamps is the 3d. 'POSTAGE' Melita stamp with inverted overprint issued in 1926. Not so well known, perhaps, is the story behind it. Was it a forgery?

To provide an answer to this question, the Legislative Assembly of Malta, on 1 April 1930, appointed a Select Committee to enquire into allegations in regard to certain dealings in Postage Stamps.¹

During question time on Monday, 31 March 1930,² Alfred Gera De Petri,³ a member of the Constitutional Party elected from the First Division, asked the Minister of Posts whether he was aware that postage stamps of the 3d. denomination of the Melita issue with the word 'POSTAGE' overprinted inverted were on the market patronized by stamp collectors. He wanted to know whether the said overprinting was printed upside down under the responsibility of the Government or through undue influence with minor employees at the Post Office, and whether he was aware of the rumour that two sheets consisting of 360 stamps of this particular denomination were sold by a Minister of the late Administration to third parties for £2 per stamp. He also queried whether a specimen of this stamp so overprinted had passed through the Post Office, to whom it was addressed and by whom; also whether the postal official who stamped it had considered that the stamp had never been issued by the Post Office.

The Minister for Posts, Robert Hamilton,⁴ rather hurriedly replied in the

1. Parliamentary Debates: Official Report. [L]egislative [A]ssembly, vol. 20, 958.

2. Op. cit., 884.

3. Alfred Gera de Petri, Ph.C., born on 15 December 1872 was the son of Hector Gera de Petri, a chemist. Educated at the Lyceum and University of Malta. Warrant 1896. Married Letterina Farrugia 1900. Elected to the Legislative Assembly 1921, 1927 and 1932 in the interest of the Constitutional Party. President of the Pharmaceutical Association, Malta. Died 14 October 1946.

4. Robert E. Hamilton, born in Hamrun on 25 February 1894, received his education at the Floriana Garrison School and at 14 at the Dockyard School. Married Mary L. Kingston 1920. Elected to the Legislative Assembly 1921, 1924, 1927, 1932 in the interest of Lord Strickland's party. Speaker of the Assembly August 1927-July 1929. Minister of posts and labour August 1929-June 1930. He died in Brisbane, Australia.

affirmative to the basic points in the question. At the next sitting, Lord Strickland,⁵ the Head of the Ministry, moved that a Select Committee be appointed for the purpose. The members were Lord Strickland, Mr Hamilton, the Minister for Industry and Commerce (Walter Salomone),⁶ Dr Paul Boffa,⁷ leader of the Labour Party, and Sir Ugo Mifsud,⁸ leader of the Opposition and leader of the Nationalist Party⁹.

At this period, the political climate was at its hottest. The local scene was bedevilled by the increasing hostility between the Strickland Government and the Church, embroiling in the process the diplomatic relations between the British Government and the Vatican. On 23 January 1930, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council confirmed the judgement of the Court of Appeal in Malta which had

declared null and void the election to the Senate of two trade union representatives.¹⁰ This entailed the nullity of several legislative measures passed by the Senate and it led eventually to the dissolution of Parliament on 17 April 1930 and the calling of elections.¹¹

When Gera de Petri tabled the question at the sitting of the 31st March, it was known that Parliament would soon be dissolved and that the country was going to face a general election. The question, therefore, was couched in a manner that would involve the whole Nationalist Party and a campaign was immediately launched by the Constitutional Party of Lord Strickland on the so-called 'Postage Stamps Scandal', supported by posters affixed all over the Island.¹² It was a golden opportunity to use it as a weapon to lambast the previous Nationalist Ministry, the more so that the Minister in charge of posts when the Melita 'Postage' set was issued happened to be none other than Dr Enrico Mizzi, who, because of his pro-Italian proclivities, was the perennial target of the imperialist propaganda machine.¹³ The reply of Mr Hamilton, the Minister in charge of posts, added fuel to the fire. He said

'It has lately come to the knowledge of the Postmaster General that a gentleman, once a Minister of the late Administration, had been in possession of two sheets of the -/3d value of Postage Stamps with the overprint "Postage" inverted. Some of these stamps were sold by the gentleman himself at £2 each... and Postage Stamps of the same description were now being offered for sale by a stamp dealer abroad at £4 each.'

10. *Privy Council Appeal No. 64 of 1929*. Lord Gerald Strickland et vs Giuseppe Grima noe. Judgement of the Lords of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, delivered the 23rd January 1930. Printed by Harrison & Sons Ltd., [London], 1930. The English judges did not spare the Governor's partisanship from criticism. They affirmed that: "It cannot be too clearly understood that the first duty of the Governor in recognising any Trade Union Council is to see that it represents so far as is possible, the views of the ultimate constituents who are represented by its members. The views, as such, of any political party in the State – whether those of the Government or of the Opposition, or of any other group, should not be allowed to enter into the question of recognition at all" (8-9).
11. Proclamation IV of 1930. The *[M]alta [G]overnment [G]azette*, no. 7304, 17 April 1930, 281. Under the 1921 constitution, the Governor had the power to dissolve both Houses "whenever he shall deem fit". The election writ appointing the Commissioners was issued on 26 April 1930 (*MGG*, no. 7310, 317-8).
12. Parliamentary debates: Official Report. [S]enate, vol. 8, 289-91.
13. Enrico Mizzi, son of Dr Fortunato Mizzi, and Maria Sofia Fogliero de Luna, was born in Gozo on 20 September 1885. Educated at the Gozo Seminary, Flores College and the University of Malta. He read law at the University of Rome and Urbino where he graduated LL.D. in 1911. Elected to the Council of Government from Gozo in 1915. He formed the Democratic Nationalist Party in 1921, coalesced with the *Unione Politica Maltese* in 1924, with whom he formed the Nationalist Party in 1926. Co-leader 1926-42. He occupied various portfolios. Elected to the Council of Government in 1939, interned in 1940, exiled to Uganda in 1942. Repatriated in 1945, he became prime minister in 1950 under the 1947 constitution. Died 20 December 1950, and given a state funeral.

5. Gerald Strickland, son of Walter Strickland and Louisa Bonici Mompalao, born on 24 May 1861. Studied in Malta, Britain and Italy. Joined hands with Dr Fortunato Mizzi to obtain a new constitution for Malta in 1887. Elected to the Council of Government 1887. Chief Secretary to Government 1888-1902. Governor of the Leeward islands (1902-04), Tasmania (1904-09), West Australia (1909-12), New South Wales (1912-17). Founded the Anglo-Maltese Party in 1921, later Constitutional Party. Leader of the Opposition 1921-27. In alliance with the Labour Party he became Prime Minister August 1927-June 1930. In 1924 he won the seat for Lancaster for the Conservatives in the House of Commons; elevated to the peerage in 1928. He professed that Maltese interests were subject to imperial interests. Died in Malta 22 August 1940.
6. Walter Luke Salomone son of Dr. Francis, born in Mosta on 19 October 1888, was educated at St Ignatius College and the University of Malta. Elected to the Legislative Assembly in the interest of the Constitutional Party in 1921, 1924, 1927 and 1932. Minister of agriculture and fisheries 1927-29, Minister of industry and commerce 1929-30. Died 8 August 1970.
7. Paul Boffa, born on 30 June 1890, was educated at Vittoriosa government school, Lyceum and University of Malta. Graduated M.D. August 1913. Joined the Labour Party 1923, returned to the Legislative Assembly 1924, 1927, 1932. Leader of the Labour Party 1927. Elected to the Council of Government 1945. Under the 1947 constitution he became Prime Minister when Labour won the election. Following the party split in 1949, he founded the Malta Workers Party. Re-elected in 1951, he joined a coalition government under G. Borg Olivier. Minister of health and social services 1953-55. Knight Bachelor 1956. Died 6 July 1962.
8. Ugo Mifsud, born in Valletta on 12 September 1889, was educated at the Lyceum and the University of Malta. LL.D. August 1910. Warrant October 1910. Appointed member of the International Law Association set up in Brussels. Elected to the Legislative Assembly in 1921 in the interest of the *Unione Politica Maltese*. Prime Minister 1924. After the merger in 1926 with Dr Enrico Mizzi's Democratic Nationalist Party, he became co-leader of the newly-formed Nationalist Party. Re-elected 1927, 1932. Prime Minister 1932-33. Held several portfolios under the 1921 constitution. Elected to the Council of Government 1939. On 9 February 1942 he suffered a heart attack in the Council when he was derided by members of the Constitutional Party for defending the right of interned Maltese citizens not to be exiled from their own country. Died two days later.
9. L.A., vol. 20, 959.

Dr Enrico Mizzi immediately requested the name of the Minister alluded to by Mr Hamilton, but the latter at first refused to divulge the name. When pressed to clear the names of the members now on the opposition benches, he complied and said: 'I can exclude every hon. member opposite. It appears that this refers to the late Count Caruana Gatto.'¹⁴

It transpired during the proceedings of the Select Committee that Count Alfredo Caruana Gatto¹⁵ was Minister for Justice only from 28 October 1921 to May 1922 under the Premiership of Joseph Howard.¹⁶ He belonged to the *Unione Politica Maltese* which was led by Monsignor Ignazio Panzavecchia.¹⁷ He was a member of the Senate, representing the Nobility, until his death on 15 October 1926.

The Select Committee started its proceedings on 3 April 1930. John Bonett,¹⁸ the Postmaster General, was the first witness to be heard on oath. He stated that he had the information about the sheets from Major William Gatt,¹⁹ the Colonial A.D.C., who had told him that a certain Pio Grech had purchased the stamps from

14. L.A., vol. 20, 885-6.

15. Alfredo Caruana Gatto was born in Valletta on 3 September 1868. Graduated B.A. in 1889 and LL.D. in 1892 from the University of Malta. He became an eminent member of the legal profession, but is best remembered as a naturalist, botanist and ornithologist who produced several publications. He was Minister of Justice in 1921-22. Founder (with William R. Gatt) of the Malta Map Society, of which he was president. It was sited at 37 Strada San Giovanni, Valletta, opposite the Co-Cathedral. General collector. Lived at 5 Strada Federico, Valletta. Died on 15 October 1926.

16. Joseph Howard, born in Valletta in 1862, was educated at the Lyceum and abroad. Served as an officer in the French military academy. He joined the commercial sector and was president of the Chamber of Commerce. In 1912 he was elected to the Council of Government. Elected to the Senate in 1921, he became the first prime minister of Malta. Died on 20 May 1925.

17. Ignazio Panzavecchia, born in Senglea on 21 November 1855, was educated at the Gozo Seminary. He represented the clergy in the Council of Government in 1891-92. In 1921 he founded the *Unione Politica Maltese* which formed the first government under the new constitution. He declined, however, to be prime minister, and the choice fell on Joseph Howard. Died on 20 August 1925. He bequeathed to the Cathedral at Mdina a rare collection of old coins of Malta.

18. John Bonett, son of Alfonso, joined the Civil Service on 7 December 1892. Appointed Chief Clerk at the Post Office on 1 November 1922 (salary £380). Postmaster General at a salary of £500 on 19 June 1929 until 12 April 1937 when he reached the age limit, earning a salary of £540. Pension £292.10s.0d. from 13 April 1937. Lived at 37 Rudolph Street, Sliema. Died 16 May 1942.

19. William R. Gatt, son of Colonel Frederick Gatt and Elisa Ferro was born on 13 March 1878. Educated at the Lyceum and St Ignatius College. Married Ortensia Flores in June 1906. Joined King's Own Malta Regiment of Militia 1898; Royal Malta Artillery 1900; Lt. 1903; Capt. 1925; Major on retirement 1928. Service Egypt, Army of Occupation 1904; European War (Eastern Front) 1914-18. Colonial A.D.C. to the Governor of Malta 1 January 1927. Lived at 11 Strada Sant' Ursola, Valletta. According to the book *Who's Who in Philately - The International Philatelic Directory* published in London in 1926, he started collecting stamps in 1892, his specialities being Great Britain, British used abroad, and war stamps. With Count Caruana Gatto he founded the Malta Map Society, of which he was the honorary secretary. Wrote the history of the Post Office and Stamps of Malta. Died 11 February 1932, survived by his only daughter, Mary.

the late Count Caruana Gatto. When asked to explain why the Parliamentary reply had referred to 'a gentleman, once a Minister of the late administration', he replied: 'I cannot. He was not a Minister at the time'.

Mr Bonett's evidence provoked a letter to the Press by Major Gatt who wrote that all he had told him was 'that the owner of the two sheets had been mentioning the name of Count Caruana Gatto'.²⁰

When Pio Grech was examined he said that on some occasions he speculated in stamps and that he had some postage stamps with inverted overprint in partnership with Inspector (Carol) Saliba.²¹ On the day of issue of the new set and even on the following days, there was a rush of speculators at the Post Office where great confusion reigned. Grech added that Saliba went to buy stamps, but complained he could not get all he wanted. Then they saw Count Caruana Gatto in the hall of the Post Office, on his way out carrying a roll of papers. They approached him and he produced two sheets saying 'Do you deal in this kind of stamps?' Saliba saw that the word 'POSTAGE' was inverted and he bought them for £80 plus some 'Self-Government' stamps. Later, the witness said that Saliba had shown him the stamps afterwards. According to Saliba's evidence, the asking price was at first £100, and he had previously seen Count Caruana Gatto upstairs at the Post Office, in the company of Mr Despott, in the room adjacent to the office of the Postmaster (Mr Alex Tortell),²² where Mr Bonett (the Chief Clerk), Mr Emmanuele Camilleri (Accountant)²³ and many other clerks were working.

Inspector Saliba admitted that he had made no enquiries to ascertain that the two sheets he had bought were the only ones with an inverted overprint. He assumed that they were from the price quoted to him, and because he had never heard of anybody having any more or buying such sheets from the Post Office counters. Asked whether Count Caruana Gatto had bought the sheets from the counter, he said he could not say because he had seen him only on the top floor and not downstairs.

20. Letter 5 April 1930 addressed to the *Daily Malta Chronicle*.

21. Carmelo Maria (known as Carol) Saliba, son of Gio. Maria. First appointment under the Colonial Government 1 December 1917. Inspector of Police 23 July 1923, salary £215. Lived at 100 Eucharistic Congress Street, Mosta. Died 9 December 1981.

22. Alexander A. Tortell, son of Augusto, born April 1886, educated at the Lyceum. Joined the Civil Service 21 December 1883; 3rd class Post Office clerk (administration) 15 May 1895; 2nd class 18 August 1904; 1st class 1 March 1920; Superintendent of Posts (later renamed Postmaster General) 1 November 1922, salary £450. Retired 19 June 1929, pension £300. Lived at 2 Sda. S. Tommaso, Floriana, and 1 Capua Street, Sliema. Died 3 December 1947.

23. Emmanuele Camilleri, son of Dr Gavino Camilleri LL.D., was born in Valletta on 29 December 1887. Educated at the Lyceum and the Royal University of Malta. Joined the Civil Service on 1 April 1907. Accountant Post Office 1 November 1922, Postmaster General 13 April 1937. On 1 November 1942 he became acting manager of the Water and Electricity Department and the Telephone Department, confirmed on 22 December 1942, with Joseph Borg Cardona filling his place at the Post Office, acting and then effective. He later rose to high posts and even acted as Lieutenant Governor in 1946. O.B.E. 1942, C.M.G. 1950. Lived at 56 Rudolph Street, Sliema. Died in 1968.

Quite a prominent stamp collector was Count Sant Fournier.²⁴ In his statement, he referred to the Select Committee what Pio Grech had told him on the purchase of the sheets. Grech had said that he had bought them from Count Caruana Gatto who, in turn, had purchased them at the Post Office. Grech's evidence before the Committee did not tally with this statement.

Count Sant Fournier came to know about the existence of the inverted overprint two years after the stamps were issued, and he had no reason to doubt that they were bought at the Post Office. He explained that everyone had a right to buy, but those who went first had a better chance 'of picking and choosing their sheets'. Buyers were not obliged to buy what the clerks gave them, but they were allowed to choose. He himself, on one occasion, had chosen £13 worth of sheets of different shades. This happened when the clerks were not very busy.

The Count categorically disagreed with the suggestion that it was impossible to pass out an error and he showed the Committee stamps in his possession which he had bought at the Post Office, all of them recent issues. They included a 'POSTAGE' overprint with a missing 'P', another overprint out of line on one stamp out of 80, a 'Self-Government' overprint with a missing 'S', and a stamp without any perforation at the top. Even other Colonies like Bechuanaland, British East Africa, Grenada and North Borneo, had inverted overprints.

One of the key witnesses was the Colonial A.D.C., Major Gatt. He related that, about a year before, Pio Grech has asked him if he could examine some stamps with 'POSTAGE' inverted. He enquired on how the stamps had originated and Grech told him he had bought them at the Post Office from Count Caruana Gatto while coming down the stairs or near the stairs. It is worth noting that Grech was rather careless in his replies to Major Gatt and Count Sant Fournier as to where the stamps had been bought from Count Caruana Gatto, while in his evidence he stated quite definitely that it was in the hall of the Post Office, when the vendor was going out into the street.

On the day of issue, 1st April 1926, Major Gatt had met Count Caruana Gatto at the Post Office. They met downstairs, the Count had nothing in his hands as he had not bought anything yet. They went up to the room where the counters were placed, the room was absolutely packed and they had to remain behind. They had a long chat together on that day, but Major Gatt left the Count at the Post Office. Major Gatt had no need to stay as his servant was buying him the stamps he needed.

The Committee investigated the possibility that the overprint was a forgery, or, alternatively, whether it had been done purposely at the Government Printing Office by some unauthorised person. Felice Mercieca was the Superintendent of the printing office when the overprinting was carried out, but he had nothing to do with the job as the work was under the control and supervision of the Postal Clerks.

24. Count Sant Fournier was probably Edward, the 6th Count, born in 1871, married in 1906.

The forme for the overprint was prepared by John Muscat Fenech,²⁵ the linotype operator at the Printing Office, and Carmelo Cacopardo, one of the compositors. After the first proof was taken by the compositor and found to be correct, the foreman, Giuseppe Micallef, used to take it to Francesco Abela,²⁶ the pressman, who placed it in the press to take a proof and compare it to a stamp of ¼d. Printing started on the Warfedale press. The postal clerks opened the packets and handed the sheets (500 in each packet) to Mr Abela. As soon as the numerator marked that 500 sheets were surcharged, Abela used to count them again. The stamps had been printed in England, they were in very good order, one sheet on top of the other, but some got rolled during printing because of the weather. These were pointed out to the postal clerk, who used to put them aside; on average, there were one or two out of 500 sheets.

The Chairman of the Select Committee asked Mr Abela if it was possible that the word 'POSTAGE' could be inverted in the process of printing. He replied it was not possible (mechanically, it is to be presumed), because there was not sufficient space for it to turn around. Then Mr Abela made a significant remark. He said: 'I used to see them, and when I found some sheets upside down, I used to put them in the right position'. This means that a number of sheets were fed the wrong way into the machine from the start. At a later stage, questioned by Dr Boffa, Mr Abela stated that before printing he used to check that the sheets were in proper position and, if one escaped his notice, the clerk, who examined them afterwards, would have found it out. Therefore, he agreed with Dr Boffa's suggestion that it was very difficult and almost impossible that the surcharge could be inverted in this way. The machine was driven by motor power and it took about 35 minutes to print 500 sheets. The work went on for about fifteen days,²⁷ from 8a.m. till 4.45p.m. with an hour break for lunch. At the end of each day's work, the type-forme was locked in the bottom drawer of a large bookcase in the superintendent's office, either in the presence of the superintendent or of the foreman, and the stamps were taken back to the Post Office. The same procedure was followed during the lunch break. Apparently, the key to the bookcase was kept by the foreman, who also had the keys of the department. On two occasions the postal clerks took their lunch with them and work was not suspended; the clerks relieved each other and the printing

25. John Muscat Fenech joined the Civil Service on 1 October 1915. Appointed linotype operator at the Printing Office 1 April 1923. Salary £120 by £5 to £150 and £0.18.9 for overtime. Later, he also received a salary of £20 as mechanic.

26. Francesco Abela's first appointment was on 27 October 1906. Appointed Pressman at the Printing Office on 1 September 1924 at a salary of £82.10.0, £9.12.6. for overtime in 1926, £6 at 3d. per ream for stamping paper and £2.10.0 for charge of machinery. He later became pressman supervisor.

27. Abela said he thought the work began on Maundy Thursday. In 1926 it fell on 1st April, the day when the stamps were issued. So the printing could have ended, but surely not started, on Maundy Thursday. Indeed, Mr Bonett stated that overprinting was done very hurriedly, during the last week of March.

went on. This had happened, according to Mr Abela, when the 2s. stamps were being overprinted.

Special ink was used for the surcharging. When in 1922 the 'Self-Government' overprint was applied, the department's usual ink was used, but, for this overprinting, a mixture was made at the Office of Public Health with the help of Dr Alex Sultana, an expert analyst.²⁸

When the operation was over, the foreman decomposed the forme by throwing the lead into the crucible to be melted. Asked when this was done, whether after hours or days, Carmelo Cacopardo could not tell. Neither could Francesco Abela.

Mr Abela was examined at length. Throughout his evidence, he asserted that during the printing there were always two postal clerks present at the Printing Office. Mr Bonett gave their names as Psaila and Aquilina. Edward Psaila,²⁹ postmaster in Gozo at the time, was the last witness to be called. His evidence threw a completely new light on the printing operation. He said that he and Aquilina did not go together to the Printing Office, but always separately on different days! He used to find the block already in its place in the machine and work started as soon as he arrived. When he left in the afternoon, the block would still be in the machine and he never took any notice of the block. During printing, he was always alone with Abela. There were other printers doing some other work, 'but on that machine and table there was with me only Abela'. When asked by Dr Boffa: 'Did you note whether he (Abela) could turn the sheets in some other direction', that is, inverted, Psaila answered: 'Yes, but I would have seen that'. Yet, Abela himself admitted that he had found some sheets upside down in the machine, and he then corrected their position.

Curiously, the Committee closed the proceedings after Psaila's evidence. Not only did it fail to recall Mr Abela and Mr Bonett, but it did not even hear Mr Aquilina as a witness.

Mr Psaila described how the printing was carried out. He used to put the sheets face downwards on the table. Then every sheet passed through the machine and it stopped on a platform. He would then see that it was stamped correctly. Each time he noticed there was a faulty print, he used to tell the printer to stop and he put the sheet aside. When they finished with a bundle, they would put in another, and so on and so forth. When the work was over, he used to number the faulty sheets and write on the carton how many there were. Back at the Post Office, he used to report the work done to Mr Bonett. He used to pay great attention, and he did not see any inverted overprints. The faulty sheets were about 10 per bundle of 500. The block

28. Alexander Sultana, son of Vincent, graduated M.D. from the University of Malta in August 1901. He joined the Civil Service on 1 October 1902 as assistant chemist at the Medical and Health Department, working with Dr (later Sir) Themistocles Zammit. Appointed Government analyst on 1 August 1920 (salary £430) and professor of Chemistry at the University of Malta on 1 October 1922 (salary £100). Died 26 June 1951.

29. Edward J. Psaila joined the Civil Service on 1 June 1917. In 1926 he was a postal clerk, 1st class, appointed on 1 April 1924 (salary £150 by £10 to £190).

was not removed during the lunch break, but he used to remain there, although he did not bother to see where the printer was. This obviously implies that he might have been all alone during the break. Mr Psaila went only twice to the Printing Office which means that the Committee did not hear any evidence from the postal clerk or clerks who attended on the other thirteen days!

When the overprinted stamps were taken back to the Post Office, the sheets were checked by Mr Bonett and some assistants. There was a large stock of about £80,000. Mr Bonett testified that he was helped by Mr Emmanuele Camilleri (the Accountant) and, to the best of his belief, there was Mr Borg as well, namely, Walter Borg. The faulty prints, according to Mr Bonett's statement, were kept in the possession of the Postmaster General or of the Cashier, namely, he said, either Mr Tortell or Mr Borg. Here, Mr Bonett's evidence was incorrect on both counts. According to Mr Tortell's statement, he was on about one month's sick leave at the time of the overprinting, and the Acting PMG was Mr Bonett himself.³⁰ Secondly, according to the Blue Book for 1926, the Cashier was Mr Emmanuele Camilleri, not Mr Borg. The latter was in 1926 a Postal Clerk, Special Class, and he became Accountant to the Department only on 19 June 1929 when Mr Camilleri became Chief Clerk.³¹

In the light of the above, namely, that Mr Bonett himself was Acting PMG when the Postage stamps were issued, the following replies to questions put to him make rather strange reading:

Q. Where did the P.M.G. keep them (the faulty prints); did he keep them in the desk?

A. No, not in the desk. He has got a safe, but I do not think he kept them in the safe.

Q. Where did he keep them then?

A. I know that he had a strong room where to keep the stamps.

Q. You assume that he kept them in the strong room?

A. I cannot say.

These vague answers seem to imply that no security measures at all were taken in regard to the faulty prints. Were they just left lying around the office? If so, they remained there for more than a fortnight, until the Board in charge of their destruction took them to the Power Station for burning. At the time, there was the practice to report to the Auditor *monthly* about the faulty prints that used to be found in the normal transactions of postal routine. However, Mr Bonett opined, an irregularity as the one in question would not have come to light in these transactions, as it would have been detected either during the overprinting or when the stamps went to the Post Office.

30. Actually, Mr Tortell was on sick leave for almost two months. During 1926 Mr Bonett was Acting Postmaster General from 29 January to 17 February, 25 February to 19 April, 18 to 27 November, 6 to 15 December (*MGG* 1926, 73, 109, 139, 466, 869, 897, 905, 923).

31. *Malta Blue Book for the year 1926*, Government Printing Office, 1927, Section 12, 53.

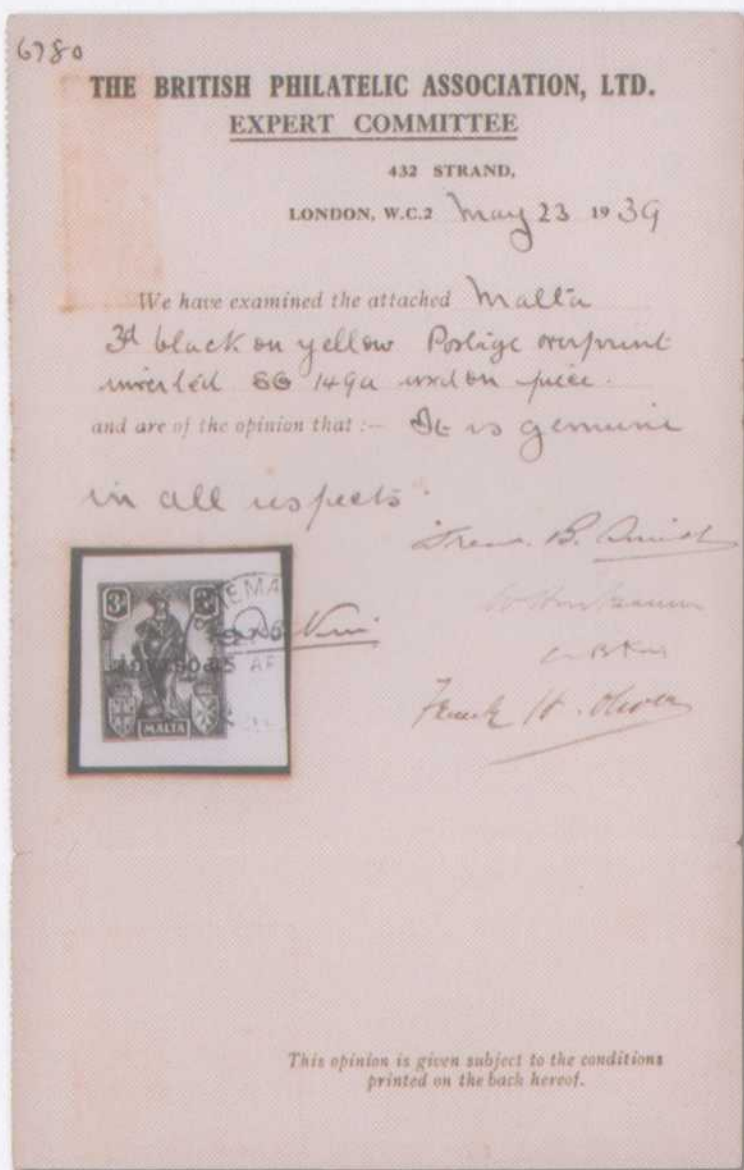


Fig. 1. The British Philatelic Association's confirmation of the stamp as being genuine.



Fig. 2. Examples of the 'POSTAGE' inverted 3d stamp.



Fig. 3. An example of the 'E POSTAG' 3d stamp.

It seems that Mr Bonett was taking too much for granted. Indeed, two independent witnesses, Count Sant Fournier and Major Gatt, refused absolutely to eliminate the margin of human error. The former stated that it was the easiest thing in the world to make a mistake and that there were lots of mistakes committed in the Post Office, although major errors were few. It was unfortunate, he said, that the overprint of the 3d. postage was in black, on black and yellow; it should have been in red or some other colour. He himself had not detected the error at first. Major Gatt went even further. When asked whether it would be difficult to detect a black overprint inverted, he replied: 'Yes, I defy anybody to detect an overprint inverted when going through the black sheets', and he added: 'A month ago Count Sant Fournier and I found it difficult to detect which was the inverted one and which the normal'.

It is opportune at this stage to explain how these two witnesses came into the picture. Early in 1929, Pio Grech approached Major Gatt to enquire whether he could examine some stamps with the word 'POSTAGE' inverted. Major Gatt replied he could do it, but with other judges if it was to be of any use. Subsequently, Mr Grech gave him two complete sheets with only six stamps missing,³² which, apparently, Mr Saliba had used on letters in 1926. Major Gatt, together with Count Sant Fournier and a dealer, Mr Forbes Bentley,³³ examined the stamps and they came to the conclusion that they were genuine in all respects, both as regards the overprint and the ink used. They used a millimetre gauge and compared them with 60 entire sheets. The faulty sheets were cut up in panes of 40. They reconstructed the two sheets (minus the 6 stamps) and measured the sheet in every conceivable manner, compared it to an original sheet and found that the panes tallied exactly to the millimetre.

Major Gatt expressed his conviction that the faulty sheets came from the same machine that overprinted the other stamps: it was the same impression and the very same type and the very same ink was used in both cases. 'What really convinced me that these stamps were genuine', he explained, 'was that in some stamps, specks of gritted dirt corresponded with the specks of dirt in the absolutely genuine sheets ...'; they were exactly in the same position, on certain letters. Those specks were convincing proof that the two sheets were printed with the same linotype that printed all the other stamps, and he excluded the possibility that they were printed with another linotype.

32. The certificate of genuineness dated 20 June 1929 mentioned further on says that 156 stamps belonging to Pio Grech were examined; therefore, only four and not six were missing.

33. Rupert Forbes-Bentley D.S.C. was an R.A.F. Flight Lieutenant and meteorologist. On his retirement, he was employed with the R.A.F. as Grade II Clerk. He was married and lived at Villa Flora, 67 Strada Misida, Birkirkara, between 1925 and 1934. His U.K. address was Massland, Beckley, Sussex. Born in 1885, he started collecting in 1904. Specialities: Great Britain, Malta, Cyprus, Gibraltar. His advertisement in the 1926 issue of *Who's Who in Philately*, published in London, reads: "MALTESE. Large stock of all issues, Blocks, Controls, etc. Present issue supplied at 5% over face value. Best prices given for Maltese stamps". He also advertised in Giovanni Muscat's *Guida Generale di Malta e Gozo* on the same lines.

Count Sant Fournier confirmed that the sheets were perfectly genuine and that this conclusion had since been borne out by dealers and auctioneers in England.

The first time Mr Forbes Bentley heard of the inverted overprint was when they were offered to him on 30 December 1928 by letter from Charles Spiteri,³⁴ of 62 Strada Santa Maria, Axiak. These were two strips of five stamps each. He was then requested by Messrs B. Seluka of Switzerland to analyse a block of forty stamps, which he thought were forgeries. After two other enquiries from Mr Roberts of the Strand and Mr Harris of *The Philatelic Magazine*, Mr Bentley sent a statement to the Press on 16 April 1929 warning collectors in general that these stamps were false. After this statement, Mr Grech went to him in June 1929 with the two sheets to prove that they were genuine, in the sense that the stamps themselves were those printed in England and the overprint was produced with the ink and with the type of the Malta Printing Office. Mr Bentley explained in his evidence that by the term 'genuine' philatelists understood that the stamps were sold from the Post Office. The Chairman interjected: 'Therefore these are not genuine?' and the witness answered: 'No; that is to say if we suspect that they came from the Printing Office but not from the Post Office'. Mr Bentley said that when Mr Grech had told him and the other two judges that he had bought the sheets from the Post Office he had said it with a smile and 'we all, I think, had our suspicions that they did not come through the Post Office'.

According to the evidence of Count Sant Fournier, a panel of three judges had given a certificate to Mr Grech. He must have been referring to the following testimonial dated 20 June 1929, which was published in *Stamp Collecting* on 10 August 1929:

We the undersigned have examined 156 stamps (belonging to Mr. Pio A. Grech of Malta) of the Malta 3d. black on yellow, overprint 'POSTAGE' (S.G. 149) on which the overprint was inverted, and we have come to the conclusion that the overprint is genuine. We have affixed our initials to each stamp to identify them.
Malta, 20th June 1929.

Edw. Sant Fournier
R. Forbes Bentley
W.R. Gatt³⁵

34. In the check list of known used copies his has been recorded:
2 AP 29 Registered cover with pair of 3d inverted overprinted sent by Charles Spiteri, was addressed to L. Vydt, Albertville, Congo Belge, and was eventually returned to Malta after redirection. The registration receipt has been preserved.
(Malta: The stamps and postal history 1576-1960. A handbook compiled by The Malta Study Circle. R.E. Martin ed., Perth, 1980, 239).

35. Loc. cit.



Fig. 4. Count Gerald Strickland.



Fig. 5. Comm. Joseph Howard.



Fig. 6. Count Eduardo Sant-Fournier.



Fig. 7. Major William R. Gatt.



Fig. 8. Count Alfredo Caruana-Gatto.

The judges examined only 156 stamps belonging to Mr Grech. The other 160 of Mr Saliba were not submitted to them. Almost all those 156 were sold to Ewens, who numbered them to show each stamp position. Inspector Saliba testified that he had sold his stamps to two firms, Allen and Nissen.

While all this was going on, neither the Postal Authorities nor the Government seemed to have taken any notice. The matter came to the fore when Colonel Alexander McKean³⁶ posted a letter with the controversial stamp. Colonel McKean was a well-known personality. He was A.D.C. to Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Torrens, Governor of Malta (1888-1889), and Military Secretary. In 1890 he married Baroness D'Amico Inguanez and lived at Notabile. He stood for the *Unione Politica Maltese* in 1921, but was not elected; later, in 1923, he was elected Senator in succession to Mgr. Panzavecchia. He was a keen philatelist.

Towards the end of 1929, he asked Major Gatt to obtain for him three of these stamps. In February 1930, Major Gatt gave him the stamps, bought from Mr Grech, and he used one of them on a registered letter posted at Notabile, addressed to himself. The postal clerk stopped the letter and telephoned Mr Bonett as he suspected that the stamp was a forgery. However, he noticed the inverted overprint after that the stamp had been obliterated. The letter was sent to Mr Bonett who spoke to the Minister about it, and it was duly delivered to Col. McKean's address. A couple of days later, Major Gatt, who knew the whole story, did the same thing with two of the stamps he owned. From Saturday, the letters were delivered to him on Monday morning as they were not detected by the Post Office, which showed, Major Gatt emphasized, how difficult it was to detect the variety. His two registered letters are listed in the Malta Handbook and they bear the date 8 March 1930.

Major Gatt had been informed by Col. McKean that his letter had been stopped. He felt that he was in a way responsible for what had happened and he went to the Postmaster General to tell him how the stamps originated. He repeated Mr Grech's story and the name of Count Caruana Gatto came up. Instantly, the party in office realized that it could make considerable political capital out of the whole matter, and Mr Gera de Petri set the ball rolling.

Count Caruana Gatto was in no position to defend himself, as he had passed away before the investigation started. There was only the word of Mr Grech and Mr Saliba that the stamps had been bought from him. But what was highly significant is the fact that not a single witness testified that the Count knew of the existence of an inverted overprint. Mr Despott was a collector and speculator. He was an intimate friend of the Count who, at one time, used to put up his stamps at a shop opposite St John's. The Count used to tell him about the speculations he made, but he never mentioned anything about the 3d. stamp. A Mr Schembri, a stamp collector, was a

friend of the Count and they used to exchange, or buy and sell stamps to each other. Yet, up to the day of his death, the Count had never mentioned anything about these stamps, and, the witness emphasized, 'He always told me about these things'.

The same answer was elicited from Major Gatt. He was a personal friend of the Count and he never heard him mention 3d. stamps with inverted overprint. Throughout his investigation, Major Gatt staunchly defended the Count. He informed the Committee that Count Caruana Gatto had sold his collections about four months before the issue of these stamps and he was not as interested as he had been before. 'He had many other collections, like the collection of beetles, of butterflies, etc. He was very generous'. Major Gatt added:

'I knew the late Count Caruana Gatto well, and I always found him very honest and honourable in all his dealings. He was an honour to his country, and a man of whom any country would be proud; and, if I remember well, the late Count Caruana Gatto presented a collection of Malta stamps to the Post Office. It was he who formed that collection and gave it to the Government.'

An interesting aspect that emerges from the proceedings of the Committee refers to the reason why the inverted overprint surfaced only after three years from the date of issue of the 'POSTAGE' set. A plausible explanation was offered by Mr Bentley. He agreed that normally speculators start selling as soon as the error is discovered, but in this case they did not do that because of the warning issued in the press about the forged 2s. denomination.

The Select Committee heard an oath in all 22 witnesses and many side issues were discussed, including Mr Saliba's part, as Inspector of Police, in the investigation and arrest in 1927 of some employees at the Power Station who had withdrawn from the furnace what they could save and make money from.³⁷

At the sitting of the Legislative Assembly of 16 April 1930, Lord Strickland laid upon the Table the *Interim Report of the Select Committee* which contained a majority report of the three members of the Constitutional Party, a rider by Dr

37. The evidence of the various witnesses has been taken from a typed copy of the report of the select committee made by Charles J. Whelpdale dated 25 April 1949, now in the collection of the present writer. It is entitled thus: *The Malta Postage Stamps scandal, being a record of the investigations, and the Interim Report, of the Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly, appointed on 1st April, 1930, to enquire into allegations in regard to certain dealings in Postage Stamps*. It consists of 54 typed folios. No copy is available in the archives of the Maltese parliament.

38. L.A., vol. 20, 977.

36. Colonel Alexander Chalmers McKean, son of Major Robert McKean, was born in 1852. He served in the Transvaal War of 1881 and in various Zulu expeditions 1883-87 in command of 6 Inniskilling Dragoon Guards 1890-95. C.M.G. 1891. Retired 1898.

Boffa and a minority report by Sir Ugo Mifsud.³⁸

The majority report of the members belonging to the Constitutional party concluded that:

- 1) the evidence heard proved that no postage stamps with the word 'POSTAGE' overprint inverted were sold by Post Office officials or through the Post Offices, at any time, to anyone;
- 2) the evidence that two sheets were sold by Count Caruana Gatto to a third party within the precincts of the General Post Office was inconclusive and could not be accepted;
- 3) the evidence indicated that two sheets of 3d. stamps, received from the Crown Agents, were overprinted at the Government Printing Office without any authority and without forming any part of the stock sent by the Post Office to the Printing Office to be overprinted, and without forming part of the overprinted stock returned to the Post Office. Consequently, the word 'POSTAGE' overprinted inverted had been forged.

The Labourite Dr Paul Boffa, without specifically endorsing the majority report, merely said that he did not exclude the possibility that the overprinting might have taken place elsewhere outside the Government Printing Office.

The Nationalist Sir Ugo Mifsud agreed only with the second conclusion of the majority report, namely, that the evidence regarding the involvement of Count Caruana Gatto could not be accepted. As regards the other conclusions, he said that he was not definitely persuaded that the attention exercised by the senior officials at the Post Office, however great that might have been, was such as to exclude absolutely the possibility of the sheets in question having been sold by or through the Post Office at any time or to anyone. On the other hand, if this possibility could be excluded, then he would concur with Dr. Boffa's rider. In view of the opinions expressed by him, he was abstaining from passing judgement on whether the stamps were a forgery. He added that he was unable to reach more definite conclusions because of the haste with which the enquiry had been conducted (owing to the imminent dissolution of Parliament) and also due to the absence of an expert and technical examination of the stamps.

The sitting of 16 April 1930 was the last one before dissolution. Sir Ugo Mifsud, after the Report was laid upon the table of the House, expressed the satisfaction of the Nationalist members that justice had been done to the memory of Count Caruana Gatto, a man who had been an honour to Parliament and whose name had been smeared by political passion.³⁹

Curiously, this was not the only occasion when some interested party endeavoured to place Count Caruana Gatto in a bad light. A scarcer overprint than the 3d. inverted occurred on the 4d. value when the overprint was very badly

39. Op. cit., 986.

misplaced, reading 'AGE POST' on most of the stamps, or only 'POST', or only 'AGE'. Someone (person unknown) wrote that Count Caruana Gatto bought the complete pane of this overprint through the agency of his friend, Colonel Fox, who was then Postmaster.⁴⁰ The anonymous originator of this 'discovery', however, failed to explain what kind of 'calendar' he was using (or inventing), because Colonel Fox was postmaster general (with the title Superintendent of Posts) between 1920 and 1922, while the overprint came into existence in 1926!

Notwithstanding that the dissolution of both Houses of Parliament was effected by Proclamation of 17 April 1930, a general election was not held. The Governor, for political reasons outside the scope of this paper, stayed the elections for two years and he kept in office the Ministers, who had his wholehearted support. As the political objective of involving in the 'scandal' the Nationalist Minister of Posts in 1926 had failed there was no follow-up of the matter by the Government, although the report of the Select Committee was of an interim nature and although, as has been amply demonstrated, there were so many grey areas in the evidence heard.

The conclusions of the Report left much to be desired. As no experts were appointed and no scientific examination took place, the Committee had no means to counter the opinion of the three judges, Gatt, Sant Fournier and Bentley that (a) the stamps were genuine and (b) the overprint was genuine. In these circumstances, from a legalistic point of view, how could the Committee, at least in its majority, pronounce outright the stamps to be forged on the ground that 'the evidence indicated' that the overprint was applied without any authority and that the two sheets did not form part of the stock that was returned to the Post Office? How could the majority of the Committee members justify this assertion when it did not even hear the evidence of the postal clerks who handled the overprinted stamps at the Printing Office on thirteen out of fifteen days? There might have been indications that this abuse might have happened, but there were as many *indications*, if not more, that a mistake had been genuinely made.

On the *vexata quaestio* as to when a stamp can be pronounced to be a forgery, it may be pertinent to ask: does the genuineness of a stamp depend merely on its material components, or also on its origin? If the origin is merely suspect, does the stamp change its nature? When associations or individuals of international repute are requested to certify the genuineness of a stamp, do they certify on the basis of technical examinations, or do they also require proof from the owner that the stamp was acquired by legitimate means across a post office counter?

The incident of the 3d. postage inverted was not the only one of its kind in Maltese postal history. On 30 September 1972 the postal administration issued three stamps of the 1965 Definitive with a decimal overprint. Soon after, the 8d. stamp with an inverted 3c. overprint appeared on the market. A Board of Inquiry was set

40. This curious, anonymous, allegation has been reproduced in the handbook of the Malta Study Circle, 242.

up, of which the present writer happened to be Chairman. The possibilities of how the sheet (or sheets) could have found its way to the market were so wide, and the alternatives so varied, that no official pronouncement was made when the inquiry was concluded. It is pertinent in the context of this paper to refer to an opinion expressed by a Detective Constable of the Philatelic Squad of Scotland Yard. He remarked that it is very normal for one or two faulty sheets to come out. Indeed, if only one or two similar sheets came out, the security must have been up to and even above the standard elsewhere.

The Interim Report of the Select Committee was severely criticised in the Press. Besides, it made no impact whatsoever in the philatelic world and the stamps originating from the sheets of Pio Grech and Inspector Saliba have been accepted and marketed ever since by all stamp dealers worldwide. Sure enough, the 3d. stamp with a forged inverted overprint does exist, and the differences between the genuine and the forged overprints have been duly noted and described in the handbook of the Malta Study Circle. But this is all the more confirmation that the two sheets put on trial were not proven guilty.

The opinion of Charles Whelpdale, who had a typed copy of the proceedings of the Select Committee, is worth reproducing. After premising that the main variety of the set was the inverted 'POSTAGE' on the 3d. value and that the 'Government convened a Board of Enquiry', he commented thus:

'A reading of the procès-verbal of the enquiry will reveal many gaps in the evidence collected, and the findings of the Board could not be other than inconclusive.'

He also pointed out that other minor varieties (in the set) consisted in the misplacement of the overprint with the result that on some stamps it appeared as 'OSTAGE P' and on others as 'E POSTAG'.⁴¹

41. C.J. Whelpdale, *The Postage Stamps of Malta*, Malta 1966, 25. Actually, the enquiry was carried out by a parliamentary select committee, not by a board set up by the government.