

## SOME MALTESE PHARMACISTS OF THE PAST

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In England pharmacy has been for centuries practised as an art by itself. In 1180 a "Guild of Pepperers or Spicers" already existed. In 1345 pharmacists formed a separate section of the Grocers' Company and in 1671 the "Worshipful Society of Apothecaries" was founded and received a charter from King James I. A Royal Apothecary probably existed since the days of William the Conqueror and certainly officially since the reign of King John, his duties consisting in compounding medicines for the Royal household, providing the palaces with the necessary wine, spices, drugs and perfumes, and eventually embalming his employers.

In Malta until late in the period of the Order of St. John pharmacy was practised as part and parcel of the art of medicine and often by the knights themselves in their large and celebrated hospital. The name of Pharmacist Chevalier Anthony de Lande appears in the records as one who, together with officials of Monsignor Dominic Petrucci (the Inquisitor-General

who was in Malta from 1579 to 1581) and some knights had been maliciously reported to Grand Master de La Cassiere as having accepted a proposal to prepare a poisonous potion for him. The charge had been made by Impellizeri, a Sicilian who had been banished from Malta by the Inquisitor. La Cassiere ordered the imprisonment of the plotters in Fort St. Angelo from where they were freed when it was discovered that the Sicilian had fabricated the whole story in the hope that his previous sentence of perpetual banishment would be abrogated.

Here are some pharmacists of the past in Malta, such as could with difficulty be discovered.

Stanislas Gatt (1744-1811) had a pharmacy at Qormi near the small church of St. Peter's in the centre of the small town. He obtained the diploma of "Aromatario" from the Chief Physician or Protomedico of the Sacred Infirmary of the Order on the 13th April 1771 (Arch No. 1192, Section 86/97) during the grand-

mastership of Pinto who had raised Qormi to the rank of a city and given it his name. Gatt who had originally studied for the priesthood had changed over to pharmacy and in 1778-1780 was chosen as a "Jurat". He is mostly remembered as the leader of the 5th Municipality (Qormi-Luqa) and the "Sindaco" for Qormi, during the uprising against the French in 1798. The French had burgled the church of St. Francis de Paule breaking down its door, tearing out holy pictures and stealing the church silver. Gatt's daughter died on the 3rd March 1811 and, broken hearted at her loss, he died the very next day.

Clemente Mifsud Bonnici was one of the pharmacists at Zejtun, "*Aromatario e dilettante di medicina*", who also had obtained his pharmaceutical diploma from the Protomedico Dr. George Imbert and from Dr. Michael-Angelo Grima. Clemente Mifsud Bonnici was the son of Joseph Mifsud and Mrs. Olympia neé Bonnici. In 1816 he married Theresa Falzon. He was the friend of Stanislaw Gatt and like him, during the despotic French rule, was selected by the inhabitants of his district (which had just lately, on the 30th December 1797, been elevated to the status of a town by the German Grand Master Fra Ferdinand von Hompesch (1797-1798) as "Citta Beland", so called after the Grand Master's mother maiden name "Bylandt") along with his comrade the Architect Michael Cachia (1760-1839) the son of the more famous Architect Dominic (1710-1790), as their co-leaders against the oppressors. Mifsud Bonnici was also one of the chief helpers of Santo Formosa from Zurrieq and took part with him in the assault against Mdina on the 13th September 1798. He likewise did sterling pharmaceutical and humanitarian work during the great plague epidemic of 1813-1814, when the dread of catching the "contagion" had been so great that priests used a metal spoon with a long handle to administer Holy Communion to the stricken patients so that they could remain at some little distance; indeed dying or dead victims were not touched by hands but were loaded on to the death-carriage and buried mostly by hooded convicts using wooden or iron implements such as rakes and

tongs; it is recorded that 13 medical practitioners, including Dr. Saviour Pisani of Vittoriosa, Dr. Michael-Angel Pace of Gozo and George Craig MacAdam, an English fellow doctor, died of the disease.

Another pharmacist was Francis Pisani who, incidentally, was married to the reverend professor Michael Xerri's (the well remembered "Dun Mikiel Xerri") niece Theresa. He openly showed his mistrust of the French overlords to the Senglea population, whom he incited to disobey their strange orders; his sentiments were unfortunately reported to the French Authority by a francophile neighbour, a frequent visitor to his dispensary and he was mercilessly shot in August 1798 suffering the same fate which befell his uncle by marriage on the 17th January 1799.

Fortunato Vella had been given his diploma of "Aromatario" by the same Medical Council of the Order's General Hospital headed by Dr. George Imbert and composed of Senior Physicians Dr. John-Dominic Blasio, Dr. Joseph Bigeni and Senior Surgeon Dr. Michael-Angelo Grima, on the 23rd September 1770. Vella's diploma can still be seen hanging on the left-hand wall at the top of the main staircase of the Royal Malta Library.

The next oldest diploma after Vella's, one about 50 years later in date, is in the possession of Mr. Joseph Galea of Mdina. It is that of Paul Stivala, who was given his diploma on the 6th August, 1817, during the Governorship of Sir Thomas Maitland (1813-1824), when Dr. Aloysius Caruana was "Protomedico".

John Mallia, (1774-1856), from Birkirkara had his pharmacy in St. Helen's Square of that small town. He was a bachelor and rather wealthy, possessing a very large estate including some lands known as "Tad-Dekan" at Msida, colloquially referred to as "Tat-Tigan" ("a frying pan", a word more commonly used by the country people than the name of a dignity of the Church chapter). It is said that Mallia had a very large clientele, since he charged less for his medicines than his colleagues did. It is a fact that he left several other houses and fields to the

church and to church charities. His pharmacy, complete with its fixtures, furniture, procelain jars, etc. he bequeathed to the Floriana Franciscan Capuchin Fathers on condition that a yearly liturgical service for the dead and for the repose of his soul, should be held, as appears in the Acts of Notary Peter Paul Psaila of the 11th June 1855.

It was quite understandable that his best friends were the Provost of Birkirkara Canon Calcedonius Agius from 1854 to 1867, Canon Michael Tonna his testamentary executor, Canon Constantine Sant, the Reverend John Micallef, the Reverend Horatius Galea and the Cleric Francis Sammut, besides Dr. Anthony Cassar, M.D., all of whom were enjoined to pray for his eternal rest.

Andrew Debono (1821-1871), from Senglea, the son of Captain Michael Debono and Theresa Carabott, studied in Malta and obtained his diploma from our University, but practised his profession at the hospital of Rosetta in Egypt. He married Victoria neé Birella and had two sons, Edward and Alfred. His great achievement was as an explorer because during 1845-1855 he voyaged along the Nile and was fortunate and strong-willed enough to arrive at its remotest source at the head of the Kagera river near Lake Tanganyika at 4037 miles from its Mediterranean end, a feat in which so many others had failed. For some years he lived at the main White Nile station. While passing through the Sudan along the cataract or rapid near Khartoum, Andrew Debono paid a visit to the Apostolic Vicar there, our co-national His Lordship Monsignor Annetto Casolani, D.D., Titular Bishop of Mauricastro (1815-1866) son of Sir Vincent Casolani, G.C.M.G. who incidentally had built the Bishops' Palace at Khartoum, later used by Major-General Charles George Gordon (1833-1885), who was killed in the Mahdi's rebellion there. On account of ill-health Bishop Casolani retired to Malta where he died on 1st August, 1866 and was buried in the Cathedral Church at Mdina.

Andrew Debono is mentioned in Alexander Maitland's book 'Speke' (Constable), where he is described as a "Maltese slave-trader who operated in the southern



**Bishop Annetto Casolani**

Sudan". On his sepulchral slab, at the old Cairo City cemetery, he is described as "a good and honest man". Debono's nephew, Mr. Amabile Debono, is also referred to as "a Maltese ivory trader who was the first European to have entered the bounds of Uganda".

Andrew Debono's son Mario, who was also a Pharmacist at Bone in Algeria, became a friend of the famous Gozitan-born French writer Laurent Ropa (1891-1967) and of the perhaps even more famous Frenchman of Maltese grandparents, the poet and Academician Fernand Grech (1873-1960).

Lawrence Dalli, from Gozo, obtained his diploma signed by the Protomedico the

Maltese Dr. Gabriel Henin who had specialized in Florence on the 26th January, 1832 (ch. Arch. No. 1187, Section 310/317) during Vilhena's grandmastership. I believe that this pharmacist who lived, according to the famous Gozitan historiographer de Soldanis, in the Renaissance house under the archway in the Citadel near the old shrine of Our Lady of Sorrows, which has since been converted into a Museum, was most probably the first qualified pharmacist in our Islands.

Augustine Xara had some reputation for having, in 1763, concocted a poultice which was said to have been useful in the treatment of "angina pectoris". In the manner of the times this poultice was made up of Maltese honey, hens' fat, flowers of wild thyme, tobacco ash and even the dried excreta of doves, to which some almond oil could be added.

Carmel Arpa, a pharmacist son of Francis-Xavier Arpa, who was a professor of Midwifery, in 1889 bought the Manoel Theatre, which he later sold to the Gollcher family, who re-decorated it at considerable expense in 1906-1907.

Anthony Emmanuel Caruana remained famous for his fine, historical novel in Maltese "Inez Farrug", set in the Aragonese period, which he wrote in 1889.

Caruana was born at Valletta on 22nd April 1838. He practised his profession at the pharmacy belonging to his maternal uncle, Dr. Andrew Pullicino, under the arcades in Valletta. He liked travelling and in 1860 went as far as Constantinople and even to Russia. He learned several languages, including Russian, and mixed with many men of letters both here and abroad. Caruana married Connie Fabri of Cospicua in 1883 but had no offspring. He died at Sliema on the 24th September, 1907.

Augustine Levanzin, (1872-1955) a man with a complex character, had qualified as a pharmacist. Levanzin first worked as an apprentice at the Dockyard, where he was promoted to clerk and then to draughtsman, but which he left to join the Seminary. After matriculating he joined the University Course of Medicine and Surgery. He obtained a B.A. degree and a diploma of Pharmacist. In 1900 he married the daughter of Dr. John Felix Inglott



**Dr. Philip Zammit**

of Cospicua. Then he rejoined the University obtaining this time the diploma of Legal Procurator. He was the editor of "Lo Studente Maltese", of "Il-Habib tal-Poplu" and of "In-Naħla" in which latter he published his novel "Is-Saħħar Falzon". A history of Joan of Arc he published in the excellent series "Moghħdija taż-Żmien" (No. 89). In 1912 he emigrated to the United States of America where for physiology studies he underwent a fast of 31 days. Back in Malta in 1927 Mr. Levanzin upheld that "Fasting promotes Health", but as he got involved in politics, he preferred to go abroad again in 1928. At one

time he was keen on "Esperanto" — the international language. He was a staunch defender of workers in general. He died aged 83 in 1955.

It is usually held that not before the first third of this century had passed was there a lady-pharmacist in our Islands; this, however, is not correct as the following exceptional case clearly illustrates. Catherine Vitale, "La Speziala", was the widow of Hector Vitale and lived at 138 Archbishop Street, Valletta. It is said that this lady, after the death of her husband, opened a small pharmaceutical store in Valletta for the use of poor patients, which earned her her appellation. She used mostly local drugs from which she then concocted medicinals in her kitchen. Her example was so successful that a little later in 1642 her friend, a spinster Catherine Scappi from Siena, Italy, (hence known as "La Senese"), of 144 Archbishop Street, Valletta, opened "La Falanga" a small institution for foundlings and the adjoining "La Casetta", a place for poor and chronically sick women. For this she came to be referred to as "La Spedaliera". On her death-bed in 1619 Catherine Vitale bequeathed all her property, including the site for the original building of Selmun Tower on the approach to Mellieha, to the famous "*Monte della Redenzione degli Schiavi*" or Bank for the Ransoming of Slaves carried off by the infidel, which she had started in 1607. She was buried at the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel at Valletta, as was later her friend Catherine Scappi: the respective marble tablets on their graves were fixed in the wall of the passage leading from the church to the sacristy for better preservation when recently the church began to be rebuilt.

Balthassar Debono from Zebbug, although a qualified doctor preferred to practise as pharmacist as several others did after him. He is best remembered not for his pharmaceutical expertise but for his founding at Zebbug in Malta the church of "Our Lady of Sorrows" in 1720 for which church he obtained in 1726 the honour of being designated a basilica.

Philip Zammit (1719-1796) from Zurrieq, obtained his diploma in Pharmacy



**Sir Themistocles Zammit**

and later his doctorate in Medicine and Surgery at the Order's Xenodochium from the Protomedico and his assistants Doctors Grima, Locano, Grech and Henin. Dr. Zammit was appointed Medical Officer in-charge of Santo Spirito and Saura Hospitals at Rabat. As a pharmacist he invented a health-giving salt and an antacid-stomach powder which were in great demand here and even in Sicily. For his chemical, pharmaceutical and medical capabilities he was highly praised by Baron Cajetan Pisani of Malta, Abbot Malherbe and the famous Father Mussio of Naples. When he died in 1796, he left his wealth to Saura Hospital which generous exam-

ple was later followed by his daughter Catherine. Oil paintings of them at Saura Hospital testify to gratitude for their benefactions. Dr. Nicholas Saura from Siggiewi, who founded this Institute on the 17th September 1639 and who died in 1654, and his daughter Isabella, who also left her patrimony thereto, are similarly remembered.

To conclude this list with a famous

name we point out that it is not generally known that Sir Themistocles Zammit (1864-1935) started his highly varied and successful working life as a pharmacist. He was first employed in a private pharmacy and later at the Central Civil Hospital in Floriana during the cholera epidemic of 1887. He had also attended a special course at the "Ecole Superieure de Pharmacie" in Paris.