

CHOLERA OUTBREAK IN 1887 — THE ZABBAR CASE

As from 1837 there were various cholera outbreaks in Malta. One of these occurred in 1887. The Zabbar historian, Karm Bonavia, wrote an extensive article on how the 1887 epidemic hit Zabbar.

This article was published in “Lehen is-Santwarju” issue No 40 of 1987. The main points from this article are:

- * This was the fifth cholera outbreak in Malta. The previous ones were in 1837 with 3792 victims, in 1850 with 1726 victims, in 1865 with 1880 victims and in 1867 with 462 victims. (Other smaller outbreaks occurred in 1854-57).

- * the first victim in Zabbar happened on 30th July 1887. This was on the morrow of the first death where the victim was a vegetable vendor, who fell sick near Portes des Bombes, and who died on 29th July 1887.

- * infected persons from Zabbar were initially taken to a cholera hospital which opened in Cospicua. Later on, 27th August, the primary school of Zabbar was converted into a hospital. This building still exists and is situated just behind the devote statue of Our Lady of Graces at the crossroads of Sanctuary Street with Main Street.

- * once the disease visited a house, the sick were transported to the hospital and the house was disinfected — the walls were stripped of all paint and a new lime coating was given and the mattress, clothes and sheets of the sick person were burned in the street.

- * there was full collaboration between Church and state —

 - # priests were encouraged to offer their services to the sick,

 - # clothes and other necessities were collected to be distributed to the needy,

 - # Bishop Antonio Buhagiar (the adjutant Bishop) encouraged prayers to Our Lady through the Rosary and a dispensation was issued permitting people to eat meat during all days,

 - # feasts and all occasions of mass congregations were prohibited, celebration of masses were not stopped but there was to be enough time-lapse between masses so as to ventilate the churches,

 - # monetary collections were organized in all parishes,

 - # Parish Priests were ordered to read and explain to their parishioners the official precautions issued by the Health Authorities.

- * Zabbar had a population of 4494. A quarter of this population (1188) lived in the three areas where Cholera hit most. These areas were

 - Sqaq Klaw with 62 houses and 341 inhabitants,

 - Sqaq Lajri with 44 houses and 332 inhabitants,

 - Biccieni with 137 houses and 615 inhabitants.

- * Zabbar had a total of 90 infected persons with 63 deaths from cholera.

- * many prejudices dominated popular belief. Among these there was the fear of the medicines provided by the health authorities. These medicines were also nicknamed as “it-tazza tal-Pulizija” (the Police glass) as it was distributed by Police Constables. This medicine was a juice made up of aromatic herbs, together with small amounts of opium, rose muscata, and chives. Bishop Buhagiar offered to ask the Parish Priests to personally deliver these ingredients to the populace together with the recipe of how to mix them up.

- * Dr Gian Felice Inglott, the police physician of Zabbar, was most active during the epidemic in Zabbar. He invited Bishop Buhagiar to visit the village. During this visit Dr Inglott showed the great

needs and the bad state of health in Zabbar. This visit ended in the Sanctuary with prayers to Our Lady and the Bishop personally contributing money to the fund set up in Zabbar to help the needy. This visit was followed by other members of the Diocesan Committee which had been set up by the Diocese to assist the sick and the poor.

* the Capuchin Friars of nearby Kalkara had opened a communal kitchen, which provided a daily bowl of soup. In August 1887 the Civil authorities opened a similar kitchen in Zabbar. It was put under the management of Guglielmo Biancardi, the school head-teacher of Zabbar. The soup included meat, rice, pasta and vegetables. Later on a half loaf of bread was added to the ration, and this bread was distributed by Parish Priest Leopoldu Farrugia.

* This cholera outbreak besides having a toll on the health of many people, it also increased unemployment and hence poverty. This increase of distress was caused also due to the fact that the ports were closed and a good number of Zabbar men worked on port related jobs. Government intervened by creating new infrastructure works and thus providing work to help lessen the situation of poverty. The parish priest of various localities wrote to the Governor asking for such projects within their localities to alleviate the burdens of the populace.

* the feast of Our Lady of Graces, which is held on the Sunday following the 8th September, was replaced by a day of prayer inside the church.

* Although incidence of cholera cases started to slow down by the end of September, the Civil Authorities waited till 14th November 1887 to declare that the epidemic had been suppressed.

* Bishop Buhagiar on the 20th November 1887 sang a solemn Te Deum in St John's Co-Cathedral and ordered that the following three days be dedicated for prayers of thanks-giving in all parishes and churches of Malta.

ref: BONA VIA Karm: "Haz-Zabbar u l-Kolera ta' Mitt Sena ilu" in "Lehen is-Santwarju" No.40 (1987)

