

Historical Article

King George V Hospital in Malta – Sacra Infermeria for the Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem

Charles Savona-Ventura

Abstract

King George V Hospital, originally commissioned in 1922, saw its closure in 1967. It was eventually reopened under the management of the Department of Health as Boffa Hospital in 1970. In the interim years, the budding Maltese jurisdiction of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem made serious bids to assume the management of the hospital hoping to set up a service for public and private-paying patients.

Introduction

King George V Seamen's Memorial Hospital sited in Floriana just outside the fortifications of Valletta, Malta was originally formally inaugurated by H.E. the Governor of Malta Field Marshal Lord Plumer on the 30th November 1922.¹ This 32-bed hospital was build following an appeal by Governor Field Marshall Lord Methuen in August 1918 as a memorial to the men of the Merchant Navy who died in the First World War.² The Foundation Stone was laid by Lady Methuen C.B.E. on the 27th March 1919. The hospital was built and administered by the "Seaman's Christian Friends Society Hospital Trust" of London. The building site presented difficulties so that while works on the foundations started on the 4th August 1920, the building could only start on the 16th May 1921 since 48 000 cubic feet of stone needed to be laid in the foundations before work on the superstructure could commence. The responsible architect was Bridgeford Pirie; the contractor Michael Camilleri. The cost for the building amounted to £16 000.³ The original hospital catered for both genders. The male services included one 12-bedded ward, two three-bedded wards, and three single-bedded rooms.

For women, the hospital had one six-bedded ward and five single-bedded rooms, one catering for maternity cases. The second floor housed accommodation for the Medical Superintendent [Dr James Milne MB ChB Capt. RAMC], the Matron [Ms. M. Hamilton Watts RRC CMB] and four nurses [including Ms Stubbins CMB; Ms Esther Hamilton Watts; and Ms. Milne CMB]. A significant monetary contribution of £25 000 enabling an annual income of £1000 to cover running costs was made by Captain and Ms. Wisely.¹ The building was eventually extended to a capacity of 48 beds.

The King George V Seamen's Memorial Hospital was very severely damaged in April 1942 by enemy action during the Second World War. It was subsequently reconstructed by funds obtained among others from the Scottish Branch of the British Red Cross who contributed over £160 000, the Silver Thimble Fund contributed £27 000, and the Nurse of Britain Gift. The rebuilt larger hospital was inaugurated by Lady Louis Mountbatten on the 30th November 1948. The hospital catered for sick and injured seamen of all nationalities and also many dependants of the service personnel. Maltese patients were admitted when beds were available.

In the early 1960s, financial constraints were being felt though the managing trust – the Seaman's Christian Friend Society Hospital Trust – resisted the closure of the hospital in Malta since it was believed that it still had a functional role within the health care delivery system in Malta. A Maltese Council of Management was established under the presidency of H.E. the Governor Sir Maurice Dorman GCMG GCVO. The Managing Committee included: Chairman – Paul Sciberras; Secretary – Surgeon Major Richard L. Casolani; Members: Dr. Eddie A. Agius; Rev. J.R.L. Ash; Mrs C. Coleiro; J.J. Conroy; Prof. Alfred J. Craig; Prof. Joseph E. Debono; Josephine Debono; Capt. M. Everard; J.A. Harding; RN Surg. Crd. Dr. J. Kirkpatrick; J.A. Maitland; Rev. J.M. Milne; Rev. Fr. Peter Serracino Inglott; Hon. Dr. Vincent Tabone, Rev. Carmelo Xuereb; and H.E. Sir John Martin; and ex-officio: Matron KGV – J.T. Purcell and Treasurer KGV – R.D.

Charles Savona-Ventura MD DScMed
Grand Archivist & Historian
Military & Hospitaller Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem
charles.savona-ventura@um.edu.mt

Image 1: King George V Seaman's Memorial Hospital



Fiddaman. Early in 1966, a memorandum was drawn up explaining the needs for the future and set up a Medical Management committee in London under the chairmanship of Sir Clement Price Thomas, then President of the British Medical Association. In spite of efforts to find financial support to maintain the hospital, the Trust decided that the hospital would have to be closed down or to be transferred to the Malta Government. On the 17th November 1966, Sir Price Thomas sent a letter to the Maltese Minister of Health Dr. Alexander Cachia Zammit suggesting that the hospital would be taken over by the government indicating that the Trust were in concordance with this proposal. The trustees decided to close down the hospital on the 31st January 1967. The Maltese Council of Management prepared a Memorandum for the future of the King George V Hospital where all the options were laid out⁴

The Order of St Lazarus interest

The Commandery of Malta of the Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem was set up with ten founder members on the 30th September 1966. The founder members included: Col. Joseph Vincent Abela [b.1903; d.1975; ad.1964] – Commander of Malta; Elias Zammit KLJ [ad.1967 – GC No. 2] – Hon. Treasurer; Anthony Zammit CLJ [d.2009; ad.1967 – GC No. 3]; Anthony Miceli Farrugia KLJ [b.1914; d.2002; ad.1967- GC No. 54] – Referendary; Robert Biasini dei Conti Stagno Navarra KLJ [b.1904; d.1995; ad.1967 – GC No.55] – Chancellor; Prof. Canon Carmelo Muscat KLJ [b.1926; ad.1967] – Chaplain; Prof. J.V. Zammit Maempel KLJ [b.1912; d.2001; ad.1967 – GC No. 59] – Hospitaller; Ms. Evelyn Abela OLJ [ad.1967 – GC No. 56]; Major Albert Edward

Abela OLJ [b.1932; d.2007; ad.1967 – GC No. 57]; Joseph Amato Gauci KLJ [b.1909; d.1995; ad.1967 – GC No. 150] – Hon. Secretary. They were supported by Chev. Sir Hannibal P. Scicluna [b.1880; d.1981; ad.1962 – GC No. 127] who was a member of the Scottish Grand Bailiwick.⁵ The closure of KGV Hospital was discussed during the third council meeting of the Commandery of Malta of the Military and Hospitaller Order of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem on the 18th May 1967. During this meeting, it was suggested that the Commandery should endeavour to interest a number of industrialists to finance the running of the hospital under the auspices of the Order. Should the financial outlay outstrip the resources of the Commandery, an alternative proposal was to run the establishment as a clinic. A decision was taken to set up an investigative commission which will seek to make representations to the Governor General. The Commission made up of Sir Hannibal Scicluna, Prof. J.V. Zammit Maempel and Anthony Miceli Farrugia met to discuss the matter on the 13th June 1967, wherein A. Miceli Farrugia reported on his representations made to J.A. Maitland representing the previous KGV Hospital Managing Committee and to the Hon. Minister of Health. Both had expressed themselves in favour of the project.⁶ A delegation from the Commandery of Malta made up of Col. J.V. Abela, J. Amato-Gauci, A. Miceli Farrugia, Prof. J.V. Zammit Maempel and Sir Hannibal P. Scicluna met on the 19th June with the Governor General. The proposed plan for the management of KGV Hospital to be taken over by the Order of St Lazarus was warmly received. The outcome of the meeting was reported to Lt. Col. Robert Gayre Grand Bailiff General and Commissioner General of the Order wherein a request was made for the support of other

jurisdictions and individual members of the Order.⁷ In response to this meeting, on the 19th July, the Governor General sent a number of enclosures relating to the history and management of KGV Hospital.⁴

A further meeting was held by the Hospitaller Commission of the Commandery of Malta with the Governor General with Lt. Col. Gayre and J.A. Maitland in attendance. On the 9th August 1967, Lt. Col. Gayre made several proposals as to future required actions, including the setting up by the Commandery of Malta of a Hospitaller Commission which would eventually serve as the Board of Directors for the Hospital and a Management Committee which would be eventually responsible to the day-to-day running of the hospital. A Board of Trustees would be responsible for the hospital funds. The latter was to be made up of: the Grand Master of the Order, the Commissioner-General, the Grand Bailiffs of England and Scotland, the Grand Administrator of the Order, and further members nominated by the Commandery of Malta, the Governor-General, the Malta Minister of Health, and the Scottish Red Cross. The scheduled timeline was to finalise discussion by September 1967, with a view of the Order assuming control of the hospital by the 1st January 1968 and opening fully functional hospital by March 1968. The proposed funding was to come through the adoption of beds by various jurisdictions of the Order, the business community of Malta, paying patients, private trusts such as the Nuffield Foundation, and the British Government.⁸

While the Malta Minister of Health was interested in the proposal and the offer to use the Order's contacts and influence with the original Seaman's Christian Friend Society Hospital Trust, he appeared reluctant to commit the Government as to what part the Order would play in the management of the reopened hospital. Lt. Col. Gayre requested a Letter of Intent from the Government of Malta to be in a legally viable position to open negotiations with the original Trust.⁹ The apparent impasse was discussed by the Council of the Commandery of Malta on the 28th September. During that meeting, it was reported that the Archbishop had been informed and had given his approval for the Order's plans for KGV Hospital. During the subsequent Council Meeting of 9th November, Lt. Col. Gayre informed the Council that while the Order as a whole was ready to finance the running of the hospital, the Minister of Health had given a negative reply to the request for a Letter of Intent necessary for the Order to enter into negotiations.¹⁰ KGV Hospital reverted to the Malta Government on the 27th November 1967.¹¹

In spite of a number of representations made to the Governor-General and the Minister of Health by representatives of the Order, no progress was registered in obtaining a Letter of Intent from the Malta

Government. At the Council Meeting of the Commandery of Malta on the 10th October 1968, a decision was made for a delegation to visit the Minister of Health. The meeting was held on the 21st October 1968. During this meeting, the Minister asked for a formal request from the Order to take over KGV Hospital stating clearly the purpose the hospital will be used for and who will be the intended beneficiaries. The Order was to provide proof of having sufficient funds to support the necessary restorations needed. It appeared that other organizations had shown an interest in acquiring the hospital as well. This formal application was sent to the Minister of Health on the 2nd November 1968.^{12,13} No response was forthcoming from the Government to the formal application. During the Council Meeting of the Commandery of Malta on the 6th February 1969, the general impression obtained after informal talks with the Secretary to the Minister of Health was that the Order's application to take over the management of KGV Hospital had little chance of being considered. It was opined that the Sovereign Military Order of Malta may have also shown an interest in acquiring the property.¹⁴ In fact during the first General Chapter of SMOM held on the 19-21st June 1967, the Grand Master of SMOM stated "Des accords sont été conclus, et sont en train de se réaliser, pour la constitution de Dispensaires Anti-dibétiques, d'une banque de sang et pour assumer la gestion de l'Hôpital King George, sex deux dernières initiatives relevent de l'Association Maltaise".¹⁵ A request was made to the Medical Officer-in-charge, Royal Naval Hospital in Malta Surgeon Rear-Admiral Dudley P. Gurd who was a member of the Order of St. Lazarus (GC No. 129) to approach the Minister of Health to stress the continuing interest of the Order in acquiring KGV Hospital. Failing this, the Order would withdraw its formal application.¹⁴ Rear Admiral Gurd met with the Minister of Health Dr. Cachia Zammit on the 21st February 1969. He was reassured that the Government was still positively disposed towards the application made by the Order of St. Lazarus though there were still some reservations that needed to be ironed out. The proposal had to be submitted to the Government Cabinet who had to decide whether the Malta Government was to assume full responsibility for KGV Hospital or devolve the responsibility to a managing organization. The report of that meeting was presented to the Council of the Commandery of Malta on the 5th March 1969 and forwarded to the Minister of Health on 7th March 1969.¹⁶ During that Council Meeting, Col. J.V. Abela informed the members that Barclays Bank was prepared to authorize an advance of £10 000 – 25 000 provided suitable guarantors were available. It was stated that to date the Grand Master was ready to guarantee £500, Lt. Col. Gayre £1000, Chev. Zammit £50 and Col. Abela

£500.^{17,18} Further guarantors were to be found to make available the necessary funds. In the subsequent days, other members of the Commandery of Malta accepted to serve as guarantors: Prof. Canon C. Muscat £100; and Ant. Miceli Farrugia £1000.¹⁸ Dr Cachia Zammit eventually denied ever having received any offer by the Order of St. Lazarus to manage King George V Hospital.¹⁹ On the 31st May 1969, the Malta Government announced that a decision had been made to take over the management of KGV Hospital.²⁰ On the 6th June 1969, the Commandery of Malta representing the Order informed the Minister of Health that the Order was withdrawing its offer to assume the management of King George V Hospital.²¹

Conclusion

The hospital renamed Sir Paul Boffa Hospital reopened in December 1970 under the management of the Department of Health.²² The hospital has a symmetrical façade consisting of a central colonnaded portico with an identical terrace at first floor. The wings are plain having five windows at both ground and first floor on each side. Built in the shape of the letter "H" with an additional block erected later, the building is practically surrounded with a veranda at ground floor and a terrace at first floor, all columned and having wrought iron railings. On the left side are a series of utility buildings, some of which are not as old as the hospital. Within the hospital are a number of inscriptions and Second World War relics, including a piece of sculpture from Parliament House in London. Of note are the stained glass windows in the chapel. The Government Regulatory body MEPA has scheduled King George V Seaman's Memorial Hospital as a Grade 2 national monument as per Government Notice no. 628/08 in the Government Gazette dated July 21, 2008

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