

THE CONGREVE FUND FOR NECESSITOUS CHILDREN

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Among the relief funds established in Malta during the first quarter of the nineteenth century to alleviate the then existing poverty and distress,¹ one encounters 'The Congreve Fund for Necessitous Children', which was established early in 1925 by the then Governor of Malta Sir Walter Norris Congreve and his consort² and it continued to function until the eve of the Second World War.³

Appointed Governor of Malta in 1924, Walter Norris Congreve had a distinguished career in the British Army. Born in 1862, he received his education at Harrow and at Pembroke College, Oxford. He passed through the Militia and was gazzetted in the Rifle Brigade in February 1885. He served in South Africa during the Boer War and in France during the First World War. In August 1919 he was appointed Commander of the British Forces in Syria and in the same year he was transferred to Egypt. He retained the latter post till April 1923, when he was appointed as General Officer Commander-in-Chief Southern Command in England itself, a post which he held until he was appointed Governor and Commander-in-Chief in Malta.⁴

As Governor under the Amery-Milner Constitution,⁵ he governed on strictly constitutional lines, adjusting with modest tactics any disagreement between himself and his ministers.⁶ He entertained the greatest interest for Malta and everything Maltese⁷ and personally won popularity amongst all classes of Maltese.⁸ He was animated by the most charitable motives in all his actions and 'for the poor he had the greatest love'.⁹ There is definitely no doubt that it was his love for the poor which animated him and his consort to establish a fund to help necessitous Maltese children, by providing them with a hot meal every day throughout the greater part of the year.¹⁰

1. Apart from the Society of St. Vincent de Paule (see A. Bonnici, *History of the Church in Malta*, iii, Malta 1965, 144-5), during the First World War a number of funds had been established to alleviate the distress created by the inflation brought about by the war. These included the Lady Methuen Fund for Distressed Families (see *D[aily] M[alta] C[hronicle]*, 26.2.1918, 5.4.1918), The National Relief Fund in aid of local charities (*D.M.C.* 28.9.1917) and the Archbishop's Bread Fund, established in 1916 and which continued to function till January 1919 (*D.M.C.* 13.10.1917, 3.2.1919).

2. *M[id] D[ay] V[iews]*, 12.12.1932.

3. This fund was definitely still functioning in 1937; see *Malta*, 16.7.1938.

4. *D.M.C.* 2.3.1927, 7.3.1927; *Malta* 3.3.1927.

5. This Constitution which provided for Self-Government after 121 years of British colonial rule, began to function in 1921. See J.J. Cremona, *The Maltese Constitution and Constitutional History since 1813*, Malta 1994, 22-3.

6. A. Mercieca, *The Making and Unmaking of a Maltese Chief Justice*, Malta 1969, 153.

7. *D[ebates] of the L[egislative] A[ssembly]*, xiii, session 3.3.1927, 6798.

8. *D.M.C.* 7.3.1927.

9. *D.L.A.*, xiii, session 3.3.1927, 6798.

10. *D.M.C.*, 27.1.1927.

The valuable contribution made by this benevolent fund can only be properly assessed if one considers the then socio-political background. An important naval station in the British Empire, Malta had, at the time, a predominantly fortress economy, largely dependant for its livelihood on the expenditure of the British Services. During the First World War, thousands of Maltese had been employed by the British Services, both at home and abroad.¹¹ However, in the aftermath of the war, thousands were discharged and there were no alternative sources of employment. In December 1921, three years after the end of the war, the number of unemployed was calculated to be about eight thousand, the larger part of whom had no trade.¹² The problem of unemployment naturally attracted the attention of the Legislative Assembly, which appointed a commission of five members from amongst the members of the same Assembly to study the problem and make recommendations.¹³

The Maltese government with the limited funds at its disposal¹⁴ could only alleviate the situation by embarking on public works.¹⁵ Unemployed persons and families in distress had then mainly to rely on the assistance provided by the Church, through its various institutes¹⁶ and charitable organizations, like the St. Vincent de Paule Society.¹⁷

Unemployment naturally led to poverty, distress and begging.¹⁸ Aware of this situation, Governor Congreve and his consort established a fund to ensure 'that children of *bona fide* poverty-stricken parents are provided with a meal of hot soup'. For the first two years, 1925-27, the fund functioned exclusively in Valletta. The Maltese Government provided the necessarily premises, the nuns of the government orphanage did the cooking, while the ladies of the Society of St. Vincent de Paule did the distribution. Thanks to local support it was possible to increase the number of recipients by 60 per cent. By January 1927 the fund had managed to extent its activities to Hamrun, where a centre was established and was also planning to extend its activities to the Three Cities and other parts of the island.¹⁹

11. *The Empire at War*, vol. 5 (Charles Lucas, ed.), Oxford University Press.

12. D.L.A., i, session 27.12.1921, 146.

13. *Ibid.*, 131, 142-3.

14. The revenue of the Maltese Government was then based on local sources. For the financial year 1 April 1921-31 March 1922, the revenue was £703, 800 while the expenditure was £746, 503. The deficit of £42, 000 was only financed from the favourable balance of £65, 000 from the previous financial year. With this precarious financial situation it was very difficult for the government to execute the projects it had in hand. See D.L.A., i, session 27.12.1921, 152-3.

15. The government hoped that 'ai nuovi lavori che contempla di fare una buona parte dei disoccupati saranno usabili'. See D.L.A., i, session 27.12.1921, 150.

16. The church provided assistance through the institutes which it had for boys, girls and old people. See *Annuario della Diocesi di Malta*, i, 1932, 106-25.

17. This Society, the aim of which was that to assist those in need, was established in Malta in 1850, by Rev. Canon Paolo Pullicino. Its first conference was held in Valletta. See Bonnici, 144-5.

18. D.M.C., 5.1.1925, editorial, 'Street begging and how to deal with it'.

19. D.M.C., 27.1.1927.

Governor Congreve, who had established this benevolent fund, was not however destined to supervise it for a long period. In ailing health, in February 1927, he was transferred to Mtarfa Hospital, where he died on the 28th of the same month. Sincerely mourned by all sectors of the population, his corpse was transported to St Paul's Anglican Cathedral in Valletta, where it lay in state. After a funeral procession from the Palace to the Customs House in Valletta, the corpse of the deceased governor was taken aboard H.M.S. *Chrysanthemum*, and transported to Filfla, where to his expressed wishes, he was buried.²⁰ A memorial tablet in stone to his memory was later erected at Wied iz-Zurrieq.²¹

Notwithstanding, however, his death and the departure of his consort from Malta,²² the fund he had established continued to function for a decade. By December 1927, the fund was maintaining three kitchens, namely at Valletta, Qormi and Cospicua, where three meals were distributed to children on a daily basis.²³ By April 1930, when the fund had already been functioning for over five years, 'no less than three hundred thousand free meals had been given in winter to poor children'.²⁴

In October 1930, as a result of financial difficulties, the fund had to close down its kitchens. However owing to the personal guarantee of Governor Sir John Du Cane and his consort, the kitchens were reopened again at the end of January 1931, at Valletta, Hamrun and Cospicua.²⁵

The fund thus continued to function in the early 1930s when Malta was going through hard times, like elsewhere, 'caused by financial stress and unemployment'. In fact a local paper in December 1931, commenting on the local situation, stated that 'there is very genuine distress and poverty in parts of the island'.²⁶ The prevalent unemployment indeed led the local ecclesiastical authorities to establish a committee in each parish which was to collect funds for distribution to the poor.²⁷

The Congreve Fund in 1932

In 1932 the fund was being administered by a committee which had as its president the Governor, as Vice-president Lieutenant Governor Sir Harry Luke and Lt. Col. P. Worall as Hon. Secretary and Treasurer together with ten other members.²⁸

20. D.M.C., 2.3.1927. *Malta Taghna*, 12.3.1927.

21. J. Calleja, *Ugo P. Mifsud (1889-1942)*, Malta 1997, 190.

22. D.M.C., 8.3.1927. Lady Congreve left Malta on 7th March 1927.

23. *Ibid.*, 15.12.1927.

24. M.D.V., 4.4.1930.

25. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932, 22.12.1932. As a result of this decision, 175 children were fed daily with the exception of the hot summer months.

26. M.D.V., 12.12.1931.

27. *L-Immakulata*, ii, February 1932, 27-29.

28. M.D.V., 23.1.1932.

Soup kitchens functioning in 1931/32

Centre	Director and Assistants	No of children fed daily
Valletta	Administered by Mr. E. Borg A&C.E. The Sisters of Charity fed the children. There were also lady helpers. ²⁹	90 ³⁰
Cospicua	Kitchen administered by Colonel M. Dundon who had initiated it. ³¹	100 ³²
Msida (established 1932) ³³	Kitchen administered by Mr. E. Borg A.&C.E. The Ursuline nuns fed the children. ³⁴	70 ³⁵
Hamrun	Mr. A. Conti administered the kitchen. The Franciscan Sisters at Fra Diegu Institute fed the children while Mgr Dean Joseph Depiro, the Director of the same institute, took a personal interest in the soup kitchen. ³⁶	100 ³⁷
Zebbug (established 1932) ³⁸	Dr. Philip Farrugia administered the fund until his departure for Gozo, after which his brother Mr. Joseph Farrugia continued his work. ³⁹	70 ⁴⁰
Total		430 ⁴¹

29. *Ibid.*, 22.12.1932.

30. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932.

31. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932, 22.12.1932.

32. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932.

33. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932, 22.12.1932.

34. *Ibid.*, 22.12.1932.

35. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932.

36. *Ibid.*, 22.12.1932. Rug-making was also being taught to the children attending the soup kitchen at Hamrun.

37. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932.

38. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932, 22.12.1932.

39. *Ibid.*, 22.12.1932.

40. *Ibid.*, 23.1.1932.

41. By December 1932, the number of children being fed was about 400. The children were being fed all the year round with the exception of a month or so, except for Zebbug, where the children were fed throughout the whole year. The total annual cost was £312.

Fund Raising

The fund's income came mainly from collection boxes in shops⁴² and from donations.⁴³ In order to raise funds, in 1933 a Charity Ball at the Palace⁴⁴ was also organized. The fund continued to function in the following year and at the beginning of 1935 it was feeding some four hundred children.⁴⁵ In 1936 and 1937 the fund entrusted the Valletta-Floriana branch of the St. Vincent de Paule Society with the daily distribution of soup to poor children in Valletta and Msida.⁴⁶ In the almost total absence of state welfare on the island during the 1920s and 1930s, the fund had certainly contributed, together with other organizations, to alleviate the existing poverty and distress.

42. M.D.V., 4.4.1931, 22.12.1932.

43. In December 1932, the donations to this fund amounted to £26.2s7d. Among the donors there were Lord Louis Mountbatten, Sir Geoffrey Congreve and Lady Congreve.

44. M.D.V., 6.3.1932. The funds collected reached the sum of £146.

45. D.M.C., 1.11.1935.

46. *Malta*, 3.4.1937, 16.7.1938.