



The Citadel, built in the 15th century, provided refuge and defence against attacks by the Turks and Corsairs.

Phoenician traders influenced Malta

By JACK GOLDFARB

Throughout its history the tiny strategic island of Malta in the mid-Mediterranean has been swept by surging tides of conquerors invading from the north and south: Romans, Carthaginians, Arabs, Normans, Sicilians. The most enduring influences on Malta's people and culture, however, have come from another direction, the Near East.

Out of the Levant came Phoenician traders who first colonized the little island.

Today most visitors to this sun-drenched island-nation inevitably find their way to the imposing, fortress-like Cathedral of St. John, the heart of the baroque-style capital, Valletta. Few visitors to Malta, however, ever find their way to another house of worship, a few streets away. Inside an unobtrusive apartment house on tiny St. Ursula Street, in an unmarked ground floor flat, is a synagogue, simply furnished with several rows of plain, straight-backed chairs. A minyan drawn from Malta's half a hundred Jews gathers here twice a month for Sabbath services and for holidays.

Malta's Jewish history goes back to the arrival of the Semitic Phoenician settlers 3,000 years ago. It is believed they were accompanied by Israelite mariners from the seafaring tribes of Zevulun and Asher. Carved menorahs and Hellenic inscriptions found in Jewish catacombs near Valletta attest to the existence of a community here in Grecian and Roman times.

For long periods during the Middle Ages the Jews of Malta — who had settled here from Sicily, Sardinia, North Africa and Spain — lived a fairly independent life. Some were doctors, a profession monopolized by Jews in Malta at that time. Others were agricultural land owners and import-export agents, but the majority were shopkeepers and itinerant merchants.

Although some Jews held prestigious posts, such as Avraham Safaradi, Malta's Chief Physician, and Xilorum, a diplomatic envoy to the court of Sicily, the community at large was often subject to restrictions. Yet a degree of tolerance and privilege also prevailed.

Jews in prison for civil debts were allowed home for the Sabbath and Holy Days. On Friday nights Jews were exempted from carrying mandatory torches,

a precaution required of all citizens to protect the island against surprise attacks after dark. Jewish communal elections were conducted with no outside interference by local authorities.

In the years leading up to the Inquisition, repressive measures were increased against the Jews, curtailing their means of livelihood, levying heavy taxes, enforcing a ghetto. Ultimately, King Ferdinand of Castile and Aragon (patron of Columbus's voyages), whose domain now included Malta, issued the infamous expulsion order of June 18, 1492, which stripped Jews of their property and banished them from his kingdom.

Half a century later, Jews were back in Malta, brought there tragically as slaves by the crusader Knights of St. John, who now governed the island. The Malta Knights waged a long war of piracy against the ships of their Moslem enemies in the Mediterranean, seizing hundreds of Jews, Moors and Turks, both passengers and crews, bringing them to Malta to be sold into slavery. But Jewish communities in Europe — in Venice, Amsterdam and Hamburg — pursuing the tradition of Pidyun Shevuim (Redemption of Captives), dutifully paid out the heavy ransom demanded to free their co-religionists.

Only with Napoleon's defeat of the Malta knights in 1798, and the subsequent island takeover by the British, were equal rights at last legally secured by Maltese Jews. The present Republic of Malta, established in 1974, guarantees full civil rights to all citizens.

Saturday morning at the synagogue on St. Ursula Street, the atmosphere was welcoming and intimate. When I arrived, two other visitors — a young French couple — and I were warmly greeted by the sixteen men and women congregants.

While a lay reader chanted familiar prayers at the makeshift bimah in the centre of the patterned tile floor, the shammas, British-born Stanley Davis, bustled about, offering siddurim, arranging aliyot, opening and closing the blue and gold velvet curtain of the Holy Ark. George Tayar, the genial community president, whose rabbinic ancestors settled here 160 years ago from Libya, invited me to sit alongside him and graciously insisted I have the first aliyah.

[Cont'd. on page B16]

Malta government helped secure site for new shul

[Cont'd. from page B12]

In late morning, after we had chorused Adon Olam, a table magically appeared, laden with wine, homemade pastries and savory snacks, prepared by a trio of hospitable ladies.

In between bites of fruity strudel and sips of kosher Italian wine, Stanley Davis, a veteran resident of Malta and holder of an O.B.E. for social and humanitarian service on the island, recounted how the community had been without a synagogue for five years after the old premises were torn down to construct a new roadway. In the interim, holy day services were held in the Israeli Embassy. The Malta government helped in ultimately locating a new site. The congregation sold one of its venerable Torahs to the Jewish Museum of New York, to acquire funds for furnishing the new synagogue.

Tayar proudly pointed out that the congregation was blessed with several enthusiastic and knowledgeable lay

readers. Among its members was a devout family of nine, the Ohayons. The father and four sons walked a mile and a half to attend Sabbath services, thus guaranteeing half a minyan by themselves.

Originating in Morocco, the Ohayons built a mikvah for the community (no evidence exists of a previous mikvah on the island), and they facilitate the importing of kosher meat and matzot. One of the Ohayon sons has even qualified as a schochet to serve the community.

The buffet table dwindled. The congregants chatted on. "Catching up" at the bi-monthly kiddush is no minor event in the social calendar, as there is little other organized Jewish community life.

I asked one lady with a rich Lancashire accent about the origins of Malta's present-day community. She explained that except for George Tayar, all the others were 'importation.' A substantial number were retirees from Britain, but younger ones

came from North Africa, and a few from Austria, Romania and other corners of Europe.

Tayar, a successful businessman in his sixties, married to an Israeli, chuckled when he related how he had started out in the food importing business at a time when there was no food to import.

In World War II Malta was savagely pounded by the saturation bombing of Axis warplanes, cutting it off from the outside world. The war's most devastated target, the island came close to starvation before Allied ship convoys eventually broke through the aerial blockade. Through it all, George somehow managed to stay in the food business.

When we finally left the apartment building that Saturday morning, I asked why there was no sign or symbol outside to indicate a synagogue. Call it 'security reasons,' said one of the congregants.

While the Maltese are considered a peaceful, friendly people, there have

been occasional violent incidents of terrorism on the island. A former Israeli Charge d'Affaires was once ambushed in her car by terrorists believed to have been Arabs, but the feisty lady shot her way out, even pursuing them as they fled.

Diplomatic ties

Malta has always maintained diplomatic relations with both Israel and the Arab nations, but after the Yom Kippur War, Malta adopted a trade embargo against Israel. Although Israel had earlier provided extensive expertise to Malta in dairy farming, poultry raising and afforestation, links between the two countries were coolly formal.

Today relations between Israel and Malta are decidedly more cordial. The trade embargo is gone. Air Malta and Israel's Arkia airline ferry visitors back and forth, and Malta's Jews are basking in the warmth.

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One of the most remarkable figures in Medieval Jewish history, Avraham ben Shmuel Abulafia, lived for many years in Malta on the adjacent rocky isle of Comino. Born in Saragossa, Spain, in 1240, Abulafia, visionary and "prophetic cabbalist," proclaimed himself the Messiah and predicted the messianic era would begin in the year 5050 (1290 CE).

Abulafia dreamed of dissolving the differences between Judaism, Christianity and Islam. On the day before Rosh Hashanah, 5040 (1280 CE) he set out to convince Pope Nicholas III to heed his ideas and ease the suffering of the Jews. His efforts ended with Abulafia being sentenced to death by fire. With the pyre prepared, the Pope suddenly died of a heart attack and Abulafia was subsequently freed.

He settled in Malta, where he wrote cabbalistic works, including *Sefer Haot* (Book of the Sign), many mystical essays on "prophetic cabbalism" and his greatest book, *Imre Sefer* (Goodly Works).