



By JACK GOLDFARB

A street in Valletta gives some idea of the baroque-style architecture common to Malta's capital.

From the air, the flat, amber-colored island of Malta in the mid-Mediterranean looks like a fish; its watery eye — the Grand Harbor of Valletta — is fixed on North Africa, its sister islets, Comino and Gozo, tail back toward Sicily.

As an ancient Christian symbol, the fish represents a significant shape for the island, which, historically, has been a citadel of Christianity on the threshold of North African Islam.

Strategic but vulnerable, Malta throughout its past has been swept by tides of conquest from both north and south: Romans, Carthaginians, Arabs, Normans, Sicilians. Yet the most lasting influences have come from another, the Near East.

Out of the Levant came the Phoenician traders who first colonized the island. St. Paul the Apostle, shipwrecked here en route to Rome, introduced Christianity, which became the established religion. Then in the Middle Ages, by way of the Holy Land, came the Knights of the Order of St. John, whose 2½ centuries' rule left the deepest imprint on Maltese culture.

Yet the Jews also played a role in Malta's history.

Today, most visitors to this sun-drenched island republic find their way to the imposing, fortress-like Cathedral of St.

John in the heart of the baroque-style capital, Valletta.

Under the gilded buttresses and ornate, vaulted ceiling, visitors gaze in awe at the high altar overlaid with lapis lazuli, marble and bronze; they marvel at the opulence of the religious art treasures — frescoes, tapestries, masterwork paintings by Caravaggio and Preti.

Few visitors to Malta, however, ever find their way to

any synagogue services on the island, his eyes twinkled behind his wide spectacles: Of course, he did — he conducted them! Levy turned out to be one of the prime movers in the recent revitalization of one of the world's oldest Jewish communities.

When Levy's daughter Renanit, became a bat mitzva in the Vallette Bet Knesset earlier this year, it was the first bat mitzva ceremony in the long annals of

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another house of worship just minutes away. In the ground-floor flat of an unobtrusive apartment house on narrow St. Ursula Street, a minyan drawn from Malta's 50 Jews gathers once a month for Sabbath services.

I might not have found the place myself — there is no outward sign or other indication — had I not met Joel Levy, the American charge d'affaires, at a U.S. Embassy reception a few days earlier.

When I asked the youthful-looking Mr. Levy if he knew of

Malta's Jewry.

The history of the Malta community goes back to the arrival of the Semitic Phoenician settlers 3,000 years ago. It is believed that they were accompanied by Israelite mariners from the seafaring tribes of Zevulun and Asher. The discovery of carved menorahs and Hellenic inscriptions in a number of Jewish catacombs near Valletta attest to a community living here in Greek and Roman times.

For long periods during the Middle Ages, the Jews of Malta, who had come from Sicily, Sar-

denia, North Africa and Spain lived an independent and prosperous life. Some were doctors, a profession monopolized by Jews in Malta at the time. Others were agricultural landowners and import-export agents, but the majority were shopkeepers and itinerant merchants.

Although some Jews held prestigious posts, such as Avraham Safaradi, the island's chief physician, and Zilorum, 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 without interference from 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. King Ferdinand of Castile and Aragon (patron of Columbus' voyage) whose domain included Malta issued the infamous expul-

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