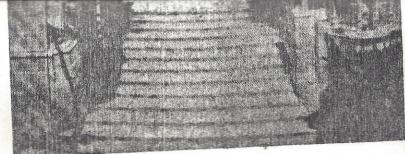
By JACK GOLDFARB



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

From the air, the flat, ambercolored 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 21/2 centuries' rule left the deepest imprint on Maltese culture.

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

sun-drenched island republic find their way to the imposing, fortress-like Cathedral of St. December 31 1087

John in the heart of the baroquestyle 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

dinia, 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 helprestigious posts, such a Avraham Safaradi, the island' chief physician, and Zilorum, diplomatic envoy to the court of Sicily, the community-at-larg was often subject to restrictions

Yet a degree of tolerance ar privilege also prevailed. Jews prison for civil debts were allow ed home for the Sabbath and h ly days. On Friday nights, Jer were exempted from carryi mandatory torches, a precautirequired of all citizens to prote the island against surprise atta after dark. Jewish commun elections were conducted with 100 from interference authorities.

In the years leading up to Inquisition, repressive measu were increased against the Je curtailing their means livelihood, levying heavy tax enforcing a ghetto. King Fe nand of Castile and Ara (patron of Columbus' voyage whose domain included Ma issued the infamouse expul

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For long periods during the Middle Ages the Jews of Malta lived an independent and prosperous life. Some were doctors, as profession they monopolized at that time.

another house of worship just minutes away. In the groundfloor 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 ser-

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

When I asked the youthfullooking 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 Zevulon 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.

Middle Ages, the Jews of Malta, who had come from Sicily, Sar-

U.S. Embassy reception a few For long periods during the Today, most visitors to this days earlier.