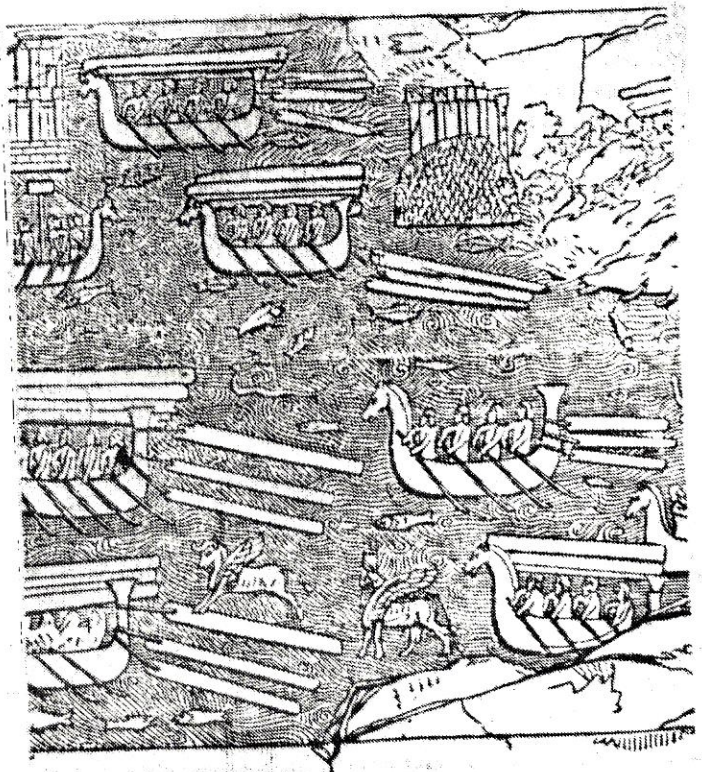


# Jews on the island of Malta

By JACK GOLDFARB



*The Semitic Phoenician merchant ships, depicted here in an Assyrian sculpture, are thought to be similar to the ones that first brought Israelite mariners to Malta 3000 years ago.*

Community leader George Tayar, whose rabbinic ancestors came to Malta from Libya 150 years ago, proudly pointed out that the "born again" congregation was not only blessed with several knowledgeable lay readers, but boasted among its members a devout family of nine. The father and four sons walked a mile-and-a-half to attend the monthly Shabbat Services, guaranteeing half a minyan by themselves.

however, was this staunchly pious family's contemplated immigration to Israel, an event that would weaken the fragile community.

I asked one lady at the kiddush about the origins of Malta's present-day community. She ex-

***Despite difficulties in finding spouses within the faith, there has only been one reported case of intermarriage in the last forty years.***

The Ohayons, who originated in Morocco, had recently built a mikveh for the community (apparently the community's first) and were now helping to import kosher meat and matza, with the cooperation of the Malta government.

One of the Ohayon sons had qualified as a shochet to serve the community. A looming shadow,

plained in her rich Lancashire accent that except for Geory Tayar, all the others were "importations." 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 60s 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.

During World War II, Malta was bombed savagely by Axis planes, cutting it off from the outside world. The island population came close to starvation before Allied convoys broke

tion from Valletta to a Malta section in its embassy in Rome.

Not modest at all, however, about advertising its presence here is the Palestine Liberation Organization. Not only is its full-size nameboard on its honey-colored villa headquarters clearly visible from an adjacent highway, but official listings of foreign embassies designate the PLO's full street address and telephone number.

A PLO-sponsored public exhibition in a national museum on Valletta's main street recently drew a considerable attendance during its brief run.

More permanently installed in an old landmark building (formerly a palace guardhouse) is the Libyan Cultural Institute, its vivid green flag and emblematic hawk conspicuous throughout the square it dominates in central Valletta. Libya maintains many institutions on the island.

Yet it would be a mistake to think that Maltese popular sentiment is pro-Arab. There does remain a strong linguistic legacy of Arabic in the Maltese language along with vestigial cultural links deriving from 200 years of occupation in the Middle Ages. But the Maltese cherish their victory over the Moslem Turks in the Great Siege of 1565, which secured Western Europe for

through the aerial blockade. Through it all, George somehow managed to stay in the food business.

As we left the apartment building that Saturday morning, I asked why there was no sign outside to indicate a synagogue. Call it "security reasons," replied one of the congregants.

While the Maltese are considered a peaceful people, there have been incidents on the island. The Israeli charge d'affaires, Esther Milo, was once ambushed in her car by terrorists who were believed to be Arabs. But the feisty lady shot her way out, pursu-

