LITERATURE

The revitalized Jewish community of Malta

By JACK GOLDFARB
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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 direction, 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 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 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 Mitzvah in the Valletta Bet Knesset earlier this year, it was the first Bat Mitzvah ceremony in the long annals 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.

For long periods during the Middle Ages, the Jews of Malta, who had come from Sicily, Sardinia, 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 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 attack 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' voyages), whose domain included Malta, issued the infamous expulsion order of June 18, 1492, which stripped Jews of their property and banished them from his kingdom.

Fifty years later, Jews were back in Malta, brought there as slaves by the crusader Knights of St. John, who governed the island. Ousted from their bastion in Rhodes by their Turkish Moslem foes, the knights were granted Malta by Spanish Emperor Charles V to defend it as a stronghold of Christianity.

The Malta knights waged a long war of piracy against the ships of their infidel enemies in the Mediterranean, seizing hundreds of Jews, Moors and Turks.

But Jewish communities in Venice, Amsterdam and Hamburg, in keeping with the tradition of *pidyon sh'vuyim*, redemption of captives, paid the heavy ransoms to free their co-religionists.

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

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On Saturday morning at the St. Ursula Street synagogue, the atmosphere was welcoming and intimate. Two other visitors — a young French couple — and I were warmly greeted by the 16 men and women congregants.

While Joel Levy chanted the familiar prayers on the makeshift bimah in the center of the tile floor, the shammash, British-born Stanley Davis, bustled about, offering siddurim, arranging aliyot, opening and closing the blue and gold velvet curtain of the holy Ark.

In late morning, after we had sung the closing lines of "Adon Olam," a table appeared filled with wine and homemade pastries.

Between bites of strudel and sips of Italian kosher wine, Stanley Davis, veteran resident of Malta and holder of an OBE (Order of the British Empire) decoration 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 make a new roadway.

During that time, High Holy Day services were held in the Israeli Embassy. The government had been helpful in finally locating a new site, and with Joel Levy's aid, the congregation sold one of its venerable Torahs to the Jewish Museum in New York and acquired funds to furnish the new synagogue.

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 Sabbath services, guaranteeing half a minyan by themselves.

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, 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 explained in her rich Lancashire accent that except for George 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

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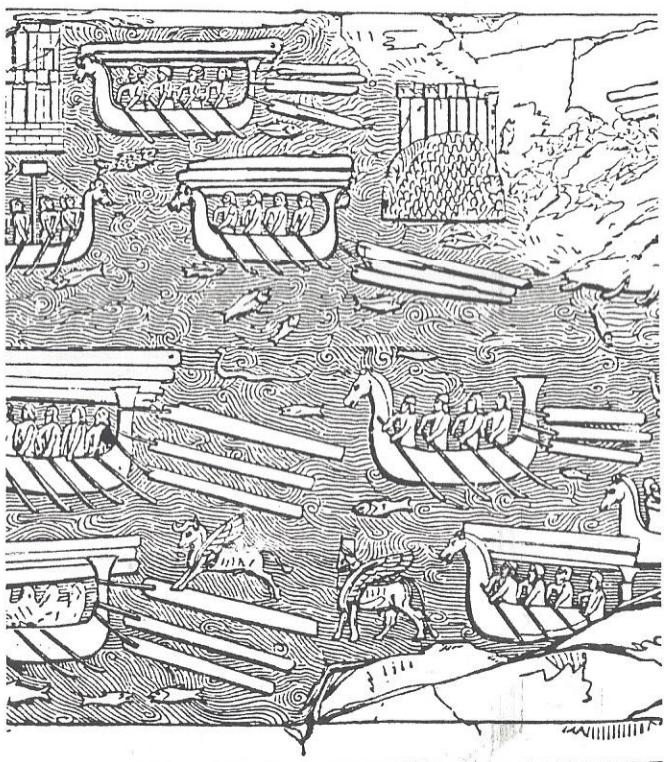
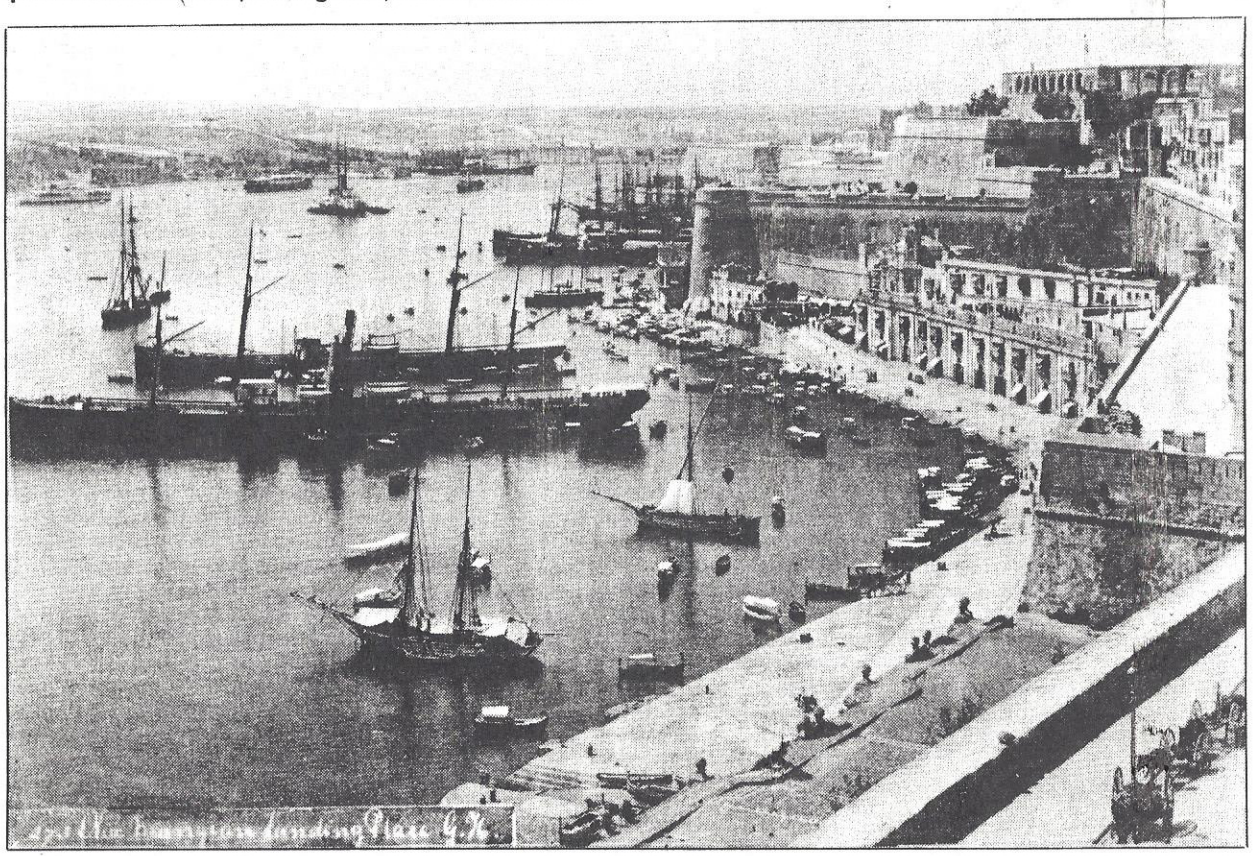
Jack Goldfarb is a former Philadelphian who lives in London.

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 3,000 years ago.



Photos courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia

The grand harbor of Valletta, as seen in this turn-of-the century photo, looks picturesque and gives no indication that in its past the small, mid-Mediterranean island withstood numerous conquests from the Romans, Carthaginians, Arabs and Sicilians.



A street in Valletta, seen here in another turn-of-the-century photo, gives some idea of the baroque-style architecture common to Malta's capital.

MALTA

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population came close to starvation before Allied convoys broke through the aerial blockade. Through it all, George somehow managed to stay in the food business.

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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, pursuing them as they fled.

At Valletta's Luqa Airport last year, Arab terrorists brought in a hijacked Egyptair plane. A botched rescue attempt by Egyptian commandos resulted in 60 deaths. One month later, Israel shifted its diplomatic representation 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 Arab 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 Christianity.

Today one can still hear the parental threat to naughty children: "I'll give you to the Arabs if you don't behave!"

In the Arab-Israel conflict, Malta has generally maintained a neutral stance. Having withstood Arab pressure to sever relations with Israel during the Yom Kippur War, Malta stayed on friendly terms with the Arab world, particularly neighboring Libya, with whom an offshore oil dispute was settled a few years ago.

Today, official statements from Tripoli and Valletta speak of "the depth of affection and friendship between the two friendly peoples."

In contrast, Malta's relationship with Israel was much warmer two decades ago. After Malta's independence from Great Britain, Israeli experts provided the island with aid in dairy farming, poultry raising, sewage projects, afforestation, even plans for an atomic-powered sea water desalination plant that never materialized.

For a time, Malta was a trans-shipment point for Israeli off-the-record exports such as fertilizers, pesticides, electronic goods and chocolates to Arab lands. Malta's exports to Israel included jeans, hides and synthetic yarns.

Today, relations between Malta and Israel are on a formally "correct" basis. Occasionally, critical remarks are heard from Maltese officials, and anti-Israel comments appear in some of the newspapers.

But a reservoir of good feeling toward the Jewish state does exist. One Maltese Christian friend in the public relations field, whose family lived and worked in Israel for many years, is convinced that admiration and respect for Israel is as alive as it always was.

On the diplomatic level, Israel's charge d'affaires, now covering Malta from Rome, and Malta's consul general in Tel Aviv (an Israeli, on whom a knighthood of the Order of St. John was bestowed) work for the day when closer ties will return.

Father Dionazio Mintoff concludes his book on Malta's Jews by noting the difficulties the younger community members have in finding spouses within the faith. Despite this, he points out, there has only been one reported case of intermarriage in the last 40 years. Mintoff claims that the lack of available partners is the principal cause the community does not grow in numbers.

Yet he ends his book on an optimistic note by affirming that Malta's Jews are held in the highest esteem by the government and the people of Malta and "they are happy to enjoy a pleasant life in an island of sunshine and friendship." ■