

# MALTA IN 1885: AN AUSTRIAN REPORT

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## INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

In the Fall of the year 1885 Malta was visited by the officers and men of the Austrian ship *Zrinyi*, a vessel under the direction of the Naval Section of the Imperial and Royal War Ministry. The Austrian government had ordered the ship on a trans-Atlantic voyage, which lasted for the greater part of a year in order to train the staff and the crew and also to promote the commercial relations of Austria with other areas. A detailed report on the entire expedition was published in Vienna in 1887.\*

Presented herewith is a translation from the original German of the introduction to this report and of the section of the text which pertains to Malta. The book from which this translation was made is entitled as follows:

*Reise S. M. Schiffes "Zrinyi" über Malta, Tanger und Teneriffa nach Westindien in den Jahren 1885 und 1886. Auf Befehl des k. k. Reichs-Kriegsministeriums, Marine-Section, mit Zugrundelegung der Berichte des Schiffcommandanten, zusammengestellt von Jerolim Freiherrn von Benko, k. k. Corvettenkapitän. (Beilage zu "Mittheilungen aus dem Gebiete des Seewesens" 1887, Heft XI). Pola: Druck und Commissionsverlang von Carl Gerold's Sohn in Wien, 1887.*

H. M. Ship *Zrinyi*, Frigate Captain Vincenz *Elder* [Baron] von Rosenzweig commanding, was ordered by the Imperial and Royal War Ministry (Naval Section) to embark upon a transatlantic voyage on 1 September 1885, the duration of which was set at 7½ months.

The route which was chosen for this voyage went via Gravosa to the Straits of Gibraltar, crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the island of Trinidad, was to include visits to almost all larger and commercially important islands of the Antilles: Barbados, St. Vincent, Sta. Lucia, Martinique, Dominica, Guadeloupe, Antigua, St. Christopher, St. Thomas, Porto Rico, Haiti, Jamaica, then Aspinwalls, Havana, finally one of the Bahama Islands, New Providence, and was to return to home waters after touching at Gibraltar again.

\* The American orthography is followed in this article.

With a view to the training of the crew and to the necessary economy the corvette was to use sail, and the course was plotted in such a way as to make the greatest use of this means of propulsion. Nevertheless, because of the short time allotted, the use of the engine was authorized in calms and slight contrary breezes in the Mediterranean and also for seeking out favorable winds.

The stay in the ports of the Mediterranean was to be limited to the time required for supplementing supplies, but in the transatlantic ports extended as long as possible corresponding to the commercial or other significance of the ports.

In order not to expose the corvette to the dangers of the cyclones which occur frequently in the West Indies during the months of August to October, it was arranged that she was in no case to land at Trinidad before the first of November, and the commanding officer was therefore directed to enter Funchal and perhaps Teneriffa and make short stays there in case of an unexpectedly favorable fast passage.

Naturally, health conditions would have to be considered, and the corvette was to avoid all places affected by epidemic sicknesses, even as places of refuge; however a partial deviation from the itinerary was authorized if made advisable for reasons of health.

The main purpose of the expedition, in addition to the training of staff and crew, was to observe the commercial and consular opportunities in the areas touched and to promote forcefully the commercial relationships of our state to those lands.

Specially worked out instructions gave the commanding officer the requisite guidance, and he was directed to consider as far as possible the expressed wishes of the interested trade offices and their questions.

In order to make the voyage instructive and fruitful in every way, the persons belonging to the ship's staff were to use every opportunity to promote the purposes of the Imperial and Royal Navy, of navigation, and of science. Everything relating to the cartography of the coasts as well as to general hydrographic and weather conditions which could supplement or correct the known data, was to be gathered and, if time permitted, any errors noted were to be corrected by the ship's own surveys and soundings.

Special attention was to be devoted to the nautical and military training of the crew and to the development of their mental abilities, then to the training of non-commissioned officers, especially from the ranks of the sailors from the *Jungenschule*.

In order to maintain the health of the men all measures were to be taken which seemed suitable to protect staff and crew from the harmful influences of the climate.

This was especially true in regard to shore leaves of the crew, who were to be informed of the necessary health rules regarding their conduct ashore.

Regarding the order of the day, modifications could be made depending on the climatic conditions of the tropics.

Outside the Mediterranean in general, but expressly in the tropics, only distilled water was to be issued, to which vinegar or lemon juice was to be added in very hot weather.

Since the Imperial and Royal War Ministry intends to enrich the Imperial and Royal Sea Arsenal gradually by such objects as are of maritime or ethnographic interest, and at the same time are mementos of the voyages of the individual ships, the ship's command also was commissioned to purchase such objects and in the selection to consider primarily maritime and military interest. Models or drawings of the vehicles, riggings, and the like, the ship's or fishing equipment, weapons, and armor were to be kept in mind.

The enrichment of the court museums was also to be considered and corresponding instructions were given the ship in behalf of these institutes.

*Zrinyi* deviated from the itinerary in omitting the voyage to the Isthmus of Panama, the most interesting point on the route, because of epidemic yellow fever there.

Due to strict observance of all hygienic measures, there was very little sickness aboard although extremely unfavorable weather conditions kept the deck and the inner rooms of the ship wet almost continually. Of this small number of illnesses the greatest part had no casual connection with the ship's hygiene.

### 1. MALTA

The Phoenicians of antiquity, who reached Malta a millennium and a half before our era and made it a flourishing colony, have since the beginning of this century been succeeded by the Phoenicians of modern times — the English.

The little island group which is named for Malta, and which played a role in the Punic Wars, on whose rocky coasts the Apostle Paul was shipwrecked, (1) which was ruled by Goths and Saracens, was subject to Normans and Aragonese, which for centuries was a fief of Sicily, which from the times of Emperor Charles V was the seat of a noble and valiant order of knights and remained under the control of 28 Grand Masters (2). (L'Isle d'Adam 1530 to Hompesch 1798 (3),) — this island group was conquered for France on 11 June 1798 by Napoleon on his quixotic expedition to Egypt (4). But when, only a few weeks later, on the first of August, Napoleon's fleet went to its grave in the Bay of Abukir, the garrison which had been left on Malta under Vaubois was left to fend for itself; English cruisers cut off its supplies, and the populace, which after only three months had risen up against the French, marched — supported

- (1) In 1960 the nineteen hundredth anniversary of St. Paul's Shipwreck was celebrated by elaborate ceremonies throughout Malta.
- (2) There is no detailed general history of Malta but a convenient brief account is available in Jacques Godechot, *Histoire de Malte* (Paris, 1952).
- (3) The Frenchman Philippe Villiers de l'Isle Adam (d. 1534) was the first of the Grand Masters of the Order of St. John to rule in Malta. In June, 1798, the German-born Grand Master Ferdinand Joseph von Hompesch surrendered the Maltese archipelago to General Napoleon Bonaparte without a struggle. The articles of capitulation are printed in Michel de Pierredon, *Histoire politique de l'ordre souverain de Saint-Jean de Jérusalem (Ordre de Malte) de 1789 à 1955*, 2nd edition, (Paris, 1956), I, 164-165. Von Hompesch died in exile in May, 1805.
- (4) A recent and readable account of General Bonaparte's activities in Egypt is provided in the book by J. Christopher Herold, *Bonaparte in Egypt* (New York and London, 1962).

by a few English, Neapolitans, and Portuguese — to the siege of La Valette, to which the French had been forced to retreat (5). On 4 September 1800, after a two-year siege, Vaubois had to capitulate to the English (6). The restoration, by the Peace of Amiens in 1802, of the Order of St. John as the sovereign on Malta encountered lively resistance among the populace; annexation to England was demanded, and the nation which rules the sea saw to it that the Congress of Vienna, which was disposing of lands and peoples, finally in the year 1814 gave her control over Malta, this important position in the Mediterranean (7).

The possession of Malta is indisputably of the greatest significance for England. Situated in the middle of the southern basin of the Mediterranean, Malta is a stage on the route to the Levant and the East Indies, and at the same time well suited to be the base of operations for a fleet operating anywhere in the Mediterranean area. Since it has been in possession of Malta, England has not been negligent in fortifying and arming this place in accord with its military importance or in providing it with all requisite technical and other facilities. Docks, workshops, and depots were laid out on a large scale. A garrison of 10,770 men, the strongest of all garrisons in the English colonies, is stationed permanently in Malta, and at the same time the command station of the English Mediterranean Fleet is here. But with the military importance of Malta and the concern for the power of resistance and for the military capability of this place, they did not overlook the fact that the situation of Malta and the excellence of its harbor offer the most significant advantages for maritime trade; a more favorably situated harbor for provisioning, repair, or temporary refuge is hard to imagine. The English government has likewise given all consideration to the facilities which serve these purposes; and just as the population, welfare, and education have increased gratifyingly under the English regime, Malta has also become an important centre of trade and commerce. The harbor, which saw a steamship (of 187 tons) enter for the first time in the year 1837, was visited in 1879 by 2894 steamers with a combined tonnage of 2,781,806 tons. Malta's income, which in 1837 amounted to only £95,600 pounds, had risen in 1879 to £183,794 and in 1883 to £205,506. These revenues cover all of the colony's own expenditures (£188,788 in the year 1883), and £5,000 can even be contributed annually to the expenses of the garrison and fleet which are to be borne by the mother country.

The movement of goods in the harbor is enormous; however, in the figures, which give for 1883 imports of £22,750,512 and exports of £21,970,678, is also

- (5) Many pertinent French documents on the occupation are printed in *Archivum Melitense: Bollettino della Società Storico — Scientifica Maltese*, Vol. V, no. 6 (Valletta, n.d.).
- (6) General Vaubois's "Journal of the Siege of Malta" is printed in Appendix III of William Hardman, *A history of Malta during the period of the French and British occupations, 1798-1815*, ed. by J. Holland Rose (London, 1909).
- (7) See Roderick Cavaliero, *The last of the crusaders: the knights of St. John and Malta in the eighteenth century* (London, 1960), chap. XXI. On the Main Guard in Valetta may still be seen by the curious visitor the following inscription:

MAGNAE ET INVICTAE BRITANNIAE  
MELITENSIVM AMOR ET EUROPAE VOX  
HAS INSULAS CONFIRMAT A.D. 1814

included the value of that part, by far the largest, of the wares which leaves Malta on board the same ships on which it came to Malta; in 1879, £794,565 in actually landed imports and £216,050 in actually shipped exports are to be compared with the value of such transshipments of approximately £18,000,000.

Ship movements in the year 1880 represented a total tonnage of 6,174,284 tons; in the same year 384,272 tons of coal had been imported and sold for purposes of shipping. In the year 1888, the total ship movement amounted to 9,618,965 tons. Of the latter number 8,445,905 tons were under the English flag, 1,178,060 tons under other flags; 9,317,825 tons of steamships and only 301,640 tons of sailing ships.

Actually the total commercial life and activity of the English Crown Colony of Malta is concentrated in the capital and chief port of La Valette.

The colony itself consists of the entire island group; Malta, Gozo, Comino, Cominotto, and Filfla with a total area of 322.6 square kilometers — probably the remains of a former chain of islands between Sicily and the African continent. Geologically the whole island group belongs to the late Eocene; white, gray, reddish, and yellow sandstone predominate, and the sea waves and surges incessantly against these soft varieties of stone, slowly but steadily diminishing the area of the islands and islets. The surface of Malta is hilly, but the greatest elevation is only 750 feet; no flowing body of water, lake, or pond exists on the island, which is in general very dry. If as a result no forests are present, nevertheless the mild climate, aided by the energetic labor of the inhabitants, produces on the thin topsoil of Malta abundant crops. Great quantities of outstanding varieties of potatoes are raised especially for the London market, but recently are also finding their way to Trieste; the grain yield is sufficient for Malta's own needs for four months; cotton thrives, and an especially fine red-flowered clover, oranges, and figs are among the chief products of the soil, which at times are harvested as often as three times a year. The humus cover is, as already mentioned, very thin; the usually sloping location of the cultivated places has therefore led to the custom of walling in the fields and gardens to prevent erosion of the earth. It is these walls, which often enclose charming gardens, that give Malta a bare appearance when seen from the sea. Nevertheless, the total picture, especially when the sun is low in the sky, is a colorful one, when the yellow and brown tones of the land, broken here and there by the dark masses of the foliage of the St. John's bread tree and the prickly pear, stand out harmoniously against the deep blue color of the sea.

The flora of the island group is identical with that of the neighboring African regions (Malta is therefore often regarded as belonging to Africa geographically), and palms, cactus, as well as other plants of the subtropical zone occur here also. The fauna, on the other hand, is quite European; notable is the Maltese dog, mentioned by Strabo, of which race some specimens are still found. Goats are numerous; asses and mules of special beauty, and cows are present only in small numbers. Twelve native species of birds are counted; large flocks of European migratory birds rest or winter here.

The climate of Malta is beneficial to health; to be sure, the summer brings a tropical heat, but the winter months are very pleasant, and for years Malta has been famed as a residence for sufferers from lung diseases. The Scirocco,

which brings with it the heat of the African deserts and on the way becomes saturated with the salty moisture of the sea, is unbearable to be sure; it springs up suddenly in the months of August and September, but it seldom lasts more than a few hours. Snow is unknown, but not hail, which falls often between September and February, the time of heavy rains.

According to the census of 8 April 1881, the population of Malta, including Gozo, but excluding the English garrison, was 149,782. This figure represented an increase of something over 8,000 inhabitants since 1871, and according to the census of 1883, that is, in only two years, increased by a further 4,474 persons. In the year 1884, the population is given as 156,675, an increase of 2,419 in one year. Although the members of the upper social classes are mixed with elements of Spanish, French, and Italian descent, the broad mass of the population is unmistakably of Arabic origin, perhaps mixed in small measure with south Italian blood. Thus, here it is the Saracens have shown themselves to be the strongest of the races which have inhabited Malta in the course of the years. Indeed, even today 70 per cent of the words of which the language of the natives consists are Arabic words, and the rest is a corrupt Italian; the purest Maltese is said to be spoken on Gozo. The Maltese are sturdy and well-formed, a dark, handsome, and supple type; the women, like all in the southern lands, have a youthful beauty of short duration. The character of the people is cheerful and full of humor, industrious, shy, and frugal; nevertheless, hot blood flows in the veins of the Maltese and the knife comes quickly to hand.

Politically, Malta is divided into 26 districts — casals; some of the localities are large and populous, but each little village has its church, which is often of remarkable beauty. In general, Catholic feeling is very strong in Malta. The old capital is located about in the middle of the island on one of the highest hills of the country. Since the founding of Valetta by the Knights of St. John this old city has borne the name of *Città Vecchia*; the Romans had called it *Civitas Melita*, the Saracens *Medina* (= 'city'). It contains notable antiquities and a cathedral which was destroyed by the earthquake of 1698 but rebuilt.

The new capital, equally important as a theatre of war and a commercial harbor, is, as mentioned above, Valetta. It is located on a rocky promontory which divides the largest harbor of Malta into two equal basins. On the little peninsulas, which further divide these basins into several pools, are raised suburbs of a sort, called by the English "The Three Cities". One of these, situated under Fort St. Angelo, is much older than Valetta, which was founded by the Knights of St. John. It bears the name Vittoriosa in commemoration of the siege of 1565, so victoriously resisted.

The stone-paved streets of Valetta run lengthwise and crosswise of the ridge on which the city is built, and the cross-streets end in steep stairs which lead down to the sea. The houses, which are all built of stone, are often large and luxurious, generally having the flat roofs usual in the South and large wood-covered balconies, all of which gives the streets an appearance of their own. Several beautiful public buildings are noted: the palace of government, the new opera house, the library (containing 48,000 volumes and open daily for free use), the former palaces of the Knights of St. John, called — strangely

— "Auberges", among which the Auberge de Castile is the most pretentious; the English and numerous Catholic churches (8). The Cathedral of St. John owns the famous "Beheading of John" by Caravaggio(9).

Most of the great structures date from the time of the rule of the Knights of St. John. The Hospital, built by the Knights, contains a remarkable hall of 508' in length; the extensive subterranean rooms, hewn in the rocks, which were created at that time for the abode of slaves, now serve as an excellent magazine for the provisions of the English Mediterranean fleet. The fortifications, laid out by the Knights, which made Malta almost impregnable, have been extended and modernized by the English, and all facilities which a first-rate sea fortress needs were created.

The city is kept clean, and the animated hurly-burly of people of all seafaring nations gives it a cheerful and pleasant stamp. Among larger works, in recent years waterworks have been begun to provide better drinking water for the city and its fortifications, and also a railroad from Valetta to Città Vecchia has been started.

During the winter months especially, a stay in Malta is considered very pleasant, and actually, the influx of foreigners who are attracted by Malta's warm winter is increasing to such an extent that the stay of winter guests is beginning to be regarded as a source of prosperity for the natives.

Through the hospitable behaviour of the Imperial and Royal Consul General von Kohen as well as of the English officials and dignitaries, the visit to Malta, which was forced upon H. M. Ship *Zrinyi* by the strong contrary winds prevailing, became a very pleasant intermezzo in the first part of the voyage which had just begun.

But when the fresh west wind, which had been a hindrance to the continued voyage, had let up, and when the supplies of fuel and provisions had been replaced, there was no delay in continuing the voyage, and the ship left harbor under steam on the morning of 12 September (10).

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(8) A valuable account of these various structures is given in the work by J. Quentin Hughes, *The building of Malta* (London, 1956). See especially Chapter II on "Churches" and Chapter III on "Palaces, Public Buildings, and Houses".

(9) For details on this famous religious edifice consult Sir Hannibal P. Scicluna, *The church of St. John in Valletta* (Rome, 1955).

(10) There follows in the report a discussion of the ship's course from Malta to Sardinia and from there through the Straits of Gibraltar into the Atlantic.