

CORRESPONDENCE RELATIVE TO THE PAINTING OF THE "MADONNA OF PHILERMOS"

by
JOSEPH CAMILLERI

The precious and miraculous picture of the "Madonna of Filermo" which according to tradition was painted by St. Luke, stood in a rich cornice on the altar of the chapel of the Holy Sacrament in St. John's Cathedral, Valletta.¹ The Knights of St. John brought the icon to Malta from Rhodes. When in 1798, Grandmaster Ferdinando de Hompesch was expelled from Malta, he took it away together with the hand of St. John and subsequently, in order to carry favour with the Protector of the Order, Paul I, Czar of Russia, he presented him with the Madonna and the reliquary.

To replace the old and venerated image, Can. P. Pullicino D.D. commissioned the Roman painter Pietro Gagliardi to paint a picture of the Holy Virgin with the Infant Jesus.²

On the 7th June, 1925 Professor Giovanni Borg, M.A., M.D., drew the attention of Government³ to a news item which appeared in the *Tribuna* of that year and started an interesting correspondence on the whereabouts of the painting. Prof. G. Borg wrote this letter⁴.

"According to a news item which appeared in the "Tribune" of the 24th (?) of April last, the Orthodox Greeks of Rhodes have asked the Soviet Government of Russia to return to Rhodes the miraculous picture of the Madonna of Filermo which Grand Master L'Isle Adam had brought away from Rhodes when he was compelled to surrender the Island to Soleman, and which Grandmaster Hompesch had taken away from the Conventual Church of St. John — which picture eventually fell into the hands of Paul the First, Emperor of all the Russians, who had then been selected as Grand Master of the Order of Malta. The Soviet Government replied to the Greeks of Rhodes that the said picture had been taken away from Gatchina, where it had been by Colonel Ignatieff, then one of Wrangel's generals (White Russians), and that after Wrangel's defeat, Ignatieff had taken the said picture to Esthonia (independent republic) where it is still to be found. Nevertheless, the Soviets promised the Greeks of Rhodes that they would send them a copy of the picture which had been made a

1. Eee Achille Ferris, *Il Maggior Tempio di San Giovanni Battista in Malta già Chiesa Conventuale del Sovrano Ordine Gerosolimitano*.
2. P. PULLICINO, *Corrispondenza dal Luglio 1870 al Marzo 1875*.
3. *Ministry of Public Instruction, File 427/25, Madonna di Filermo, Encl. 1, 2, 3, 4*.
4. *Ibid.*

few years previously by order of the Emperor Nicholas, and which was at Gatchina in the place of the original picture; at the same time, the Soviets were to have another copy made at Gatchina in replacement of the first copy which they would send to Rhodes.

I have so much delayed bringing this to your knowledge, because I had immediately interested Chev. Hannibal Scicluna in the matter, *qua'* member of the Commission appointed to watch over our antiquities and artistic patrimony, and Mr. Scicluna had assured me that he would have stimulated the interest of our Government with a view to the intermediary of the British Ambassador. I now find that on the contrary Mr. Scicluna has approached the Grand Master of the Order of Malta at Rome, so that picture would go to Rome, and not come to Malta. Still, I think that we are in time, if you will take action to assure for this Island the possession of this precious relic, the historical value of which is undeniable."

The Antiquities Committee, having been acquainted by the contents of this letter wrote through its secretary Mr. Temi Zammit to the Minister of Public Instruction and showed him that it was of opinion that Government should take such convenient action as might tend to secure that historic relic of these islands⁵. While the whole matter was referred to the Head of Ministry, Prof. G. Borg was informed⁶ that Government was considering what steps to take. We also know from this correspondence that Chev. Hannibal Scicluna denied the accuracy of the statement made about him in Prof. Borg's letter.

The Head of the Ministry agreed to the suggestion⁷ "that His Excellency might be asked to address a confidential letter to His Majesty's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Latvia and Esthonia (Mr. J.C.T. Vaughan, C.M.G., C.V.O.) soliciting His Excellency's assistance in locating the picture, and, in the event of it being found, his advice as to the procedure which this Government should follow to bring about the return of this picture to Malta". On the 24th June, 1925, H.E. the Governor, W.N. Congreve submitted this despatch to J.C.T. Vaughan, His Britannic Majesty's Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Esthonia, Reval⁸.

"At the instance of my Ministers, I have the honour to invite your Excellency's attention to the accompanying translation of an extract from a local historical work, in which reference is made to the loss to the island of a sacred picture known as the image of the "Madonna di Filermo". For the space of over 260 years this picture was the revered adornment of the Chapel of St. John the Baptist in Valletta. Nothing is known here of the vicissitudes of this valuable relic of the

5. *Ibid.*, Secr. Antiquities Committee to M.P.I., 12.6.1965, Encl. 5.

6. *Ibid.*, Clerk to the M.P.I. to Prof. G. Borg, 16.6.65, Encl. 6.

7. *Ibid.*, E. Bonavia to Head of Ministry, 18.6.65, Encl. 7, 8.

8. *Ibid.*, 24th June, 1925, Encl. 11.

Order of St. John of Jerusalem after its presentation to the Emperor Paul. It has, however, been recently stated that it is "at present in Esthonia", an indication which is, of course, too vague to be helpful in tracing the whereabouts of the picture.

My Ministers have now submitted to me a wish that I might enlist Your Excellency's kind assistance in locating the picture, if possible; in the event of it being found, Ministers and I would be grateful for your advice as to the proper course of procedure to be followed for the recovery of the picture and its safe return to Malta."

The British Legation in Riga made the necessary enquires and investigations as to the whereabouts of the painting. Useful information was sent to the Governor of Malta⁹. Count Ignatiev's address was also given.

"It appears that this sacred picture, and certain other relics of the Order of St. John, belonged to the late Russian Imperial family and were, prior and during the war, kept in the church at Gatchina. During General Yudenich's operations against the Soviet forces in 1919, the relics were removed for safety to Reval. There they passed into the possession of Count Alexei Ignatiev, head of the Russian White Cross in Esthonia; it is reported that he intended to hand them to the Dowager Russian Empress Marie in Copenhagen, but it has since been ascertained that he did not do so."

This correspondence also shows that all the above facts have also been brought to the notice of the Secretary of the Order of St. John in London and we are given to understand that possibly further investigations have been made by him.

This data was communicated to the Antiquities Committee and on its suggestion the Hon. E. Dandria, Minister for Public Instruction instructed his clerk to prepare a draft letter "clear and very courteous"¹⁰ to count Ignatiev.

This draft letter was prepared and submitted to the Hon. M.P.I.¹¹

"... It has now come to the knowledge of the Government of Malta that this picture has passed into your possession after the Russian revolution and the setting up of the Soviet rule in Russia.

You would be rendering a great service to Malta if you were to restore this historical relic of the "Madonna di Filermo" to its original home. For Malta this relic, the retrieving of which is the cherished hope of the Maltese people, is of great importance from a historical standpoint, while if it were housed in another place, its historical value would not be significant.

The Government of Malta would deem it a great favour if you would be good enough to communicate with them on this subject and

9. *Ibid.*, 20th July, 1925, Encl. 13.

10. *Ibid.*, 19.9.1925.

11. *Ibid.*, Encl. 15.

to state the terms under which you would be willing to part with this relic and allow of its being restored to Malta where it may figure again among the objects which illustrate the history of the famous Order of St. John of Jerusalem in Malta."

It seems, however, that the whole matter stopped at this instance. This crucial letter was never sent to Count Ignatiev and the problem remained unsolved¹².

12. In the *Annales de l'Ordre Souverain Militaire de Malta*, v. XXVII (1968), n. 4, pp. 107-111, appeared an article written by Edmond Ganter with the title "*L'icône de Notre-Dame de Philerme dans l'iconographie orientale*"; at the end of the article a note (p. 111) reads: "Lors de la Révolution d'Octobre, cette icône fut sauvée par l'Impératrice-Mère et transportée à Copenhague. Elle la remit sur son lit de mort au Patriarche orthodoxe-serbe, qui la déposa dans le trésor royal à Belgrade où des amis d'un membre éminent de l'Ordre la virent encore. Au cours de la dernière guerre, la sainte image accompagna la famille royale de Yougoslavie lors de sa fuite après le bombardement allemand. La Reine-Mère, qui dirigeait ce group, était accompagnée de son aide-de-camp, un Slovène catholique, le Colonel Gasperic. Ce dernier aurait emporté l'icône en Italie où il s'était réfugié. On ignore où se trouve actuellement ce trésor".