

THE LAND OF THE 'TURKS' NORTH AFRICAN ADVENTURE

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Djerban Migration

In the year 1245 Malta was sparsely populated, so much so that foreign labour had to be imported to work the royal farms, which at that time were being managed by agents of the king of Sicily. The labourers were in fact Tunisian serfs from the island of Djerba.¹

Until the Second World War North African nationals were commonly referred to in Malta as 'Turks',² a term which did not distinguish Arabs from Berbers, or ersatz Ottoman subjects whose nominal authority was well and truly relinquished. At that time some people in Birgu were called Girbin. In Maltese this means 'coming from Djerba'. Girbin derives from Gerbijin – 'from Gerba'. Perhaps there was a colony of redeemed slaves in Birgu, the city that was the first seat of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem and consisted of many ethnic groups such as Armenians, Greeks and Jews.³

Over time the island of Malta became densely populated and for many years this overpopulation caused problems with health and self sufficiency. Both situations were difficult for government to handle. One answer was to encourage emigration, a reversal of that much earlier immigration. The proximity of the Maghreb with its easy sea access, native Semitic tongue and shared cultural affinity made Tunisia an obvious choice with entrepreneurial Maltese. Industrialisation that had spread throughout Europe in the 19th century was also affecting Ottoman areas, which to some extent were already imitating western ways with which the Maltese would be familiar.

Maltese migration to Tunisia 1823-1844

Maltese traders who, a generation or so earlier, might have resorted to piracy found it relatively easy to fill their sponararas with European textiles, metal ware,

1. J. Cassar-Pullicino, *Studies in Maltese Folklore*, MUP 1992, 71.
2. G. Lanfranco, 'Old smoking pipes', *L-Imnara* 18, vol.1, no.1, 1994.
3. D. Darmanin, pers. comm. 20-10-2002.



Fig. 1. *Tal-Latini*, a working boat evolved from the *speronara*.

gunpowder, tobacco and wine, and to distribute these goods along the North African coast in exchange for oil, dates, leather and cereals. As this trade grew there was an increasing number of openings for Maltese entrepreneurs in the coastal towns and cities. In fact, Masters of *speronaras* controlled much of the coastal trade of Tunisia. The whole business was supported by an infrastructure of Maltese boatmen, porters and carters, also carriage men, shop keepers, tobacconists and wine shop proprietors. Although it was not until the 1860s when Maltese, Jews

and others had gained the right to own their own property, that cafés converted to the sale of alcohol, smoking and games of chance.⁴

With so much coastal trade in the hands of Maltese, people found it as cheap and simple to move about in the small vessels of their friends and relatives as to book passages in larger ships sailing direct. The skipper of a Maltese *speronara* might charge 2/- or so for the 200 mile crossing to Tunis.⁵ In Tunisia some 3000 Maltese had distributed themselves along the whole coastline from Bizerta to Djerba.⁶ In Djerba there was a permanent Maltese and Italian community from 1830. They lived in *caravanserais* or *fondouks* of 20 to 30 rooms and each room might well contain a whole Maltese family. According to the British Consul the Maltese comprised over three quarters of the European population.⁷ They were the early pioneers ... people like the *Licaris* and the *Caravellas*.⁸

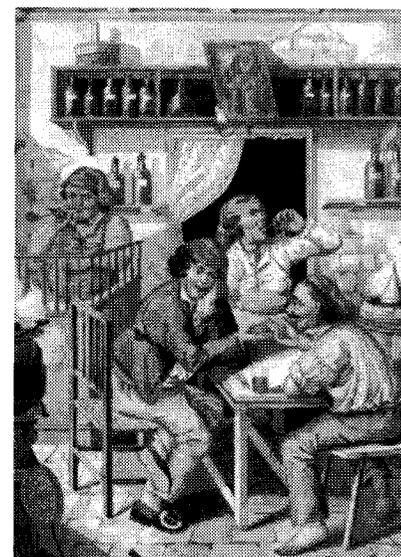


Fig. 2. 'A Maltese Pothouse' watercolour by Brockdorff.

These migrants would have felt reasonably at home in Tunisia not only because of the similarity in language, but also the houses that had common architectural features. The *ghorfa*, a grain store in Tunisia, the type of structure

4. J. Wood, 'So Has the Almighty Willed it', *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 31 October 2004, 56-57.
5. C.A. Price, *Malta and the Maltese*, Gozo Press 1989, 53.
6. Cassar-Pullicino, 73.
7. Price, 60.
8. Darmanin pers. comm.



Fig. 3. The fondouk Maltese, Place d'Algerie, Houmt Souk, Djerba.

which is built of a random mixture of cut stone and rubble rendered with plaster with a barrel vaulted roof. These buildings are, in most instances, grouped around a common enclosed area called a ksar (pl.ksour). Open stairways provide access to the complex. In Malta the ghorfa was the residential part of the razzett, generally at first floor level above stables and storage. In Maltese houses the entrance lobby or covered walkway was called siqifa, a term still used in Tunisia. Another feature common to Tunisia is the muxrabija, a latticed box or screen through which one can see out without being observed.⁹

In addition there were shared customs to do with food and common beliefs associated with birth, marriage and death. Both societies believed a child's birthmark could be attributed to the mother's ungratified desire for strawberries or mulberries during pregnancy.¹⁰ A celebratory semolina and honey cake maqrud (Maltese: qaghaq tal-ghasel) is common to Malta, Kerkennah and mainland Tunisia.¹¹ The bride's trousseau was carried to the groom's house in a senduq (a coffer).¹²

It was the custom in both Tunisia and Malta that the close family of a deceased was not allowed to cook for 3 days following bereavement. The extended family was expected to perform that duty.¹³

A hard life

No undertaking is entirely without misadventure. Smuggling was rife, explosives the favourite contraband. For example the following incident took place in Tunis on 12 November 1839 when a Maltese speronara with a manifest of dried fruit and biscuits blew to pieces in La Goulette. The boat actually had 117 barrels of gunpowder aboard. The explosion killed all the crew and some of their friends, it also sank a Tunisian boat. The British Consul was away, but his deputy had apparently given the Maltese to understand they had a right to import gunpowder. Other Europeans didn't like the way Maltese deposited gunpowder in their rooms where they not only cooked but were 'continually smoking with the utmost sangfroid'. Maltese boats sometimes discharged their cargo in the inner harbour, virtually under the windows of the Bey's Palace. If such an incident had occurred there the Consul imagined the building would have been totally demolished and angry Moors would probably have assassinated every Christian in Tunis!¹⁴

In Malta in 1823 a law was passed banning slavery. Officers at the lazaretto were instructed to inform on the employers of servants suspected of being slaves, since all men and women became free on landing in Malta by virtue of the new legislation. However, slavery was still endemic in the Barbary states, Tunis and Djerba being the northern entrepôt of trans-Sahara caravans. Ships manifests in Malta confirm onward passage particularly of negresses to Constantinople, in both Tunisian and Turkish carriers.¹⁵ In 1835 it was categorically stated that no slaves were transported from Barbary to Turkey in British or Maltese vessels.

Cholera and other plagues were a fact of life at home and abroad and had to be endured, but fear of facing these epidemics away from the native land added an extra dimension.¹⁶ In 1868, following a severe winter and the failure of crops, Arabs were dying in their thousands. There were reports of mothers hurrying to towns abandoning those children too ill and exhausted and who would cause delay. There was an outbreak of cholera in the Maltese community, funds were stretched and the Consul personally had to take in a dozen or so children, starving and cold.¹⁷

13. Cassar-Pullicino, 74.

14. Public Record Office, London. FO 102 63.

15. Quarantine registers of Malta: RML, AOM6526-6532 / Libr MS 818, 820 (1654-1816).

16. Price, 54.

17. Richard Wood to Rt Hon Lord Stanley, F.O. London, 04-01-1867.

9. C.J. Jaccarini, *Ir-Razzett: The Maltese Farmhouse*, PEG 1998, 94.

10. Cassar-Pullicino, 215.

11. Cassar-Pullicino, 78.

12. Cassar-Pullicino, 76.

Other dangerous situations arose from being a third party in local political disturbances. For example, in Tunis in 1842 the Sultan encouraged his envoys and officials to whip up religious fervour in order to tighten the bonds of empire. Outside the cities things could be somewhat unsafe. In the year of the famine 1868 two Moorish gentlemen hired a carriage driven by two Maltese. Because of the state of the road they entered the town of Messakin, one hour from Sousse. The Muslim inhabitants regarded the town as holy and so set about the Maltese who were only saved by the two Moorish men and their friends. Eleven of the Muslim ringleaders were sentenced by the Bey to corporal punishment, four sent to the galleys, two banished to the isle of Djerba and the rest sent to prison. For their severe injuries and indignities the Maltese received 4000 piastres (cf. in 1866 prisoners were allowed 1 piastre a day for their keep).¹⁸ Residents of Sousse, while enjoying trade with Europeans would not allow Jews or Christians to enter the city. The Bey intervened to allow Christians the right of entry and fined the city elders £3000.¹⁹

Whilst the vast majority of immigrants led ordinary lives, salacious, criminal and unusual activity came to the notice of authority, perhaps giving a distorted impression of national characteristics.

In 1838, a 15 year old Maltese girl had an adulterous affair with a Tunisian, although when she found the liaison was not all that was promised she recanted and was repatriated.²⁰

In 1844, a Maltese resident of Tunis was executed for double murder.²¹ The British Consul had sanctioned a Moslem court. Maltese protesters appeared in the streets with the banner "Maltese, the Mahometans, enemies of the Cross, must not steep their sacrilegious hands in the blood of Christians".²²

In 1850 Vice Consul Crowe claimed travel expenses for a return journey Tunis to Djerba. He went by sciacbecque which cost 140 piastres. In his claim form he also asked 25 piastres out of the public purse for the Cabin Boy's presents. The reason for the journey was to hear the case concerning Attard and Cutuluma's complaint about the Governor of Djerba, that he allegedly 'offered them violence'.²³

Social organisation

In these communities the Catholic church was profoundly influential, its members originating in countries where religious practice, both individual and collective, was ingrained. Social conformity was widespread: there being a direct correlation

between the number of births and baptisms, likewise deaths and Christian burials. When unions were illegitimate in the eyes of the church they were normally regularised by subsequent marriage. Religion therefore was part of life. In Tunisia it was in no way obligatory to become a Muslim. With a changing political scene and the annexation of the country by France the priesthood was predominantly either Maltese or French.²⁴ In Djerba the Catholics were mainly Maltese and the relative isolation of this community partly explains the continuity of culture, the only outside influence being that of fishermen and travellers. As a result of this isolation the influence of the priest was more than just a straightforward religious role.

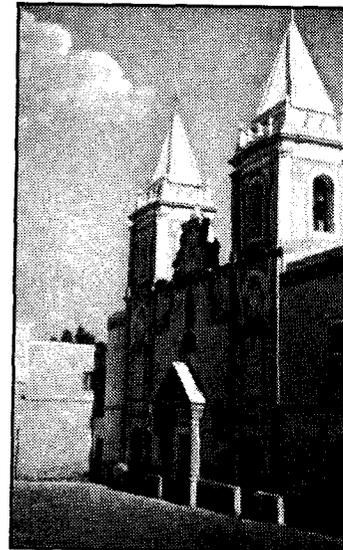


Fig. 4. Saint Joseph's Church, Place Aricha, Houmt Souk, Djerba.

By 1841 missionary work was being organised by the Capuchin order. However, circa 1845-46 Mgr. Fidèle Sutter, a Capuchin who occupied the apostolic see of Tunis insisted on the necessity of 'raising a church at Djerba for some hundreds of Catholics'.²⁵ This idea came to fruition amazingly quickly as the architecturally Italianate building, a landmark in the centre of Houmt Souk, was ready for Christmas 1847 and officially open in 1848. Also that year a piece of land outside the Medina was walled off and consecrated for Catholic burials. Between 1849 and 1850 it received the bones which had been used in the construction of the 'Tower of skulls'. This monument, in which Dragut Reis used the heads of his enemies, commemorated a victory over the island's Spanish garrison.²⁶ During his journey to Djerba in May 1845, Mgr. Sutter was offended by this use of Christian remains and on his return to Tunis petitioned the Bey to have the skulls removed.²⁷ Between 1848 and 1852 there were also 17 Maltese and 2 Sicilian burials in the new cemetery.²⁸

18. Richard Wood to Mustapha ben Brahim 11-02-1867

19. Richard Wood to Rt Hon Lord Stanley, F.O. London, 05-12-1866.

20. L.C. Brown, *The Tunisia of Ahmad Bey 1837-1855*, Princeton UP 1974, 245.

21. Brown, 247.

22. Price, 55.

23. Public Record Office, London. FO 102 43.

24. P. Soumille, *Iles de Méditerranée*, Éditions du CNRS, Paris 1981, 37.

25. Soumille, 33.

26. J. Wood, 'Grisly Business in Djerba', *The Sunday Times of Malta*, 17 March 2002, 44-45.

27. Anselmes des Arcs, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Mission des Capucins*, Rome 1889, 125, in Soumille 1981, 33.

28. Soumille, 35.

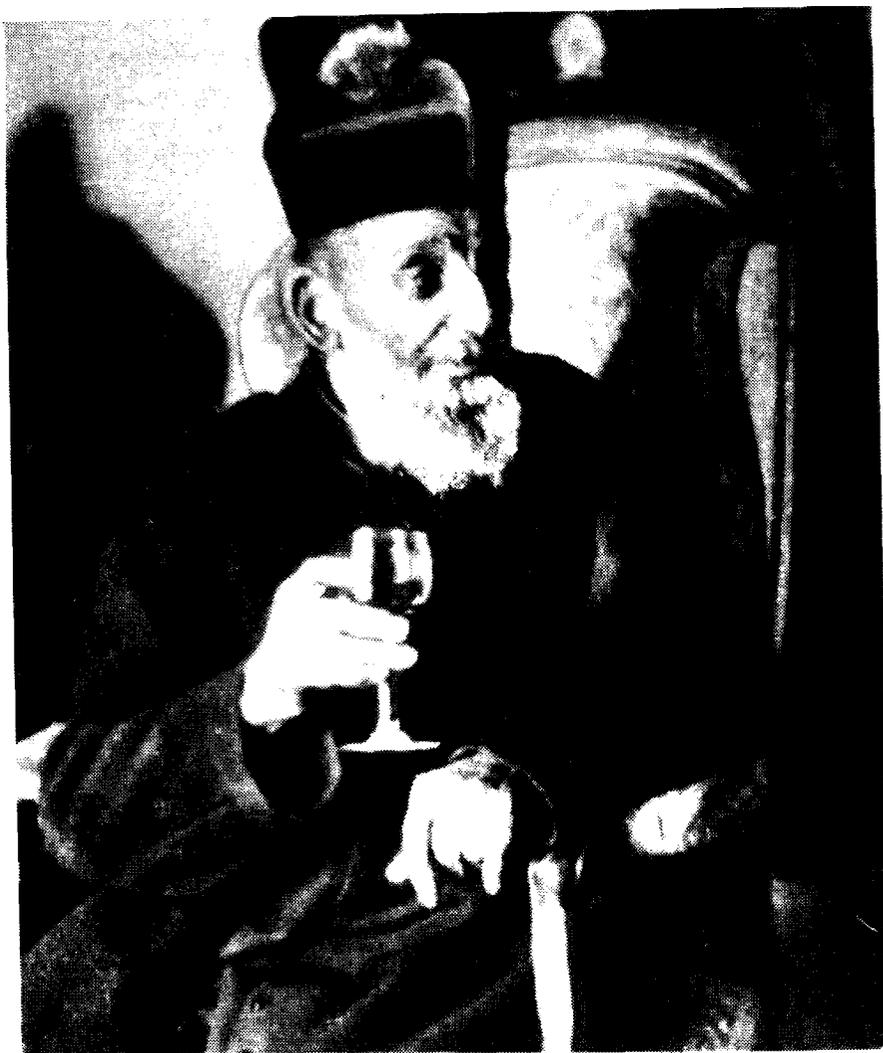


Fig. 5. Father François Xerri 'takes a glass of wine with British soldiers'.

The first priest Gaetano de Ferrare, aided by brother Ricci, was responsible for construction of the church. He was succeeded in 1854 by Cazzolino.²⁹ Then followed a French Capuchin, Bois.³⁰ For 10 years from 1869 to 1879 there were 2 Benedictines who maintained the faith on Djerba. The extant parish history

29. Soumille, 32.

30. Wood 2004, 56-57.

dates from 1880 during the tenure of the priest Joseph Darmanin. Darmanin had been an army chaplain with the UK forces in the Far East and was described as being intelligent, public spirited, tolerant and a man who deplored ignorance and misery in his parishioners. He made every effort to ensure they learned the value of thrift and good working habits. He gave moral and practical guidance to the then 400 strong community. It was said they blindly followed the instructions of their priest.³¹ Subsequently the parish organisation was first entrusted to the White Fathers, then lay priests, but most frequently to Maltese priests because of the numerical superiority of that race. Perhaps the longest serving priest was Francis Xerri who, according to his marble memorial on the floor of the now defunct Saint Joseph's, was born Xaghra, Gozo in 1860 and served Djerba parish from 1901 until his death in December 1948. As an 83 year old his picture appears in a review celebrating the end of German occupation.³² Reportedly he rejoiced that as a native of Malta he was a British subject and an avid devotee of UK radio news.

In 1909 Xerri's curate, Busket, certified the baptism of (another) Joseph Darmanin. This Darmanin, born Djerba to Salvatore and Carmela (née Camisuli), later moved to Libya in search of work. There, in 1934, he found a bride. In order to marry, Joseph had to request that Xerri make a copy of the necessary paperwork, Xerri obliged. Sadly 3 years later Joseph died in Tripoli, aged 28.³³

The church in Djerba was closed in 1964 by agreement between the Vatican and Tunisian authorities.

In 1878, one of the Benedictines, Vaggioli, approached Rome for permission to create a religious school staffed by Sisters.³⁴ To this end the first schools on Djerba were run by the Sisters of Charity. This school for Catholic girls and boys, separated by sex but under one roof, was opened in April 1879 and run by 3 Sisters of Saint Joseph. The children got a basic education. The school was free for children of very poor parents and as most of the children came from poor families they were provided with basic equipment such as pen, ink, paper, and, in addition, needle and thread for the girls. The school was first maintained by the congregation of the 'Propagation of Roman Catholicism'. In 1880 the school was under the direction of the 'Propagation of the Faith and Study of Eastern Schools'.³⁵ 1887 saw the permanent foundation of the school in Houmt-Souk.³⁶

31. K. Lanz, *Jerba: Une île méditerranéenne dans l'Histoire*, Institut National d'Archeologie et d'Art, Tunis 1982, 71.

32. *Revue Anglaise Parade* no.138, Éditée au Caire, Avril 1943.

33. Public Record Office, London FO 161/7.

34. Soumille, 33.

35. F. Arnoulet, 'La pénétration intellectuelle en Tunisie avant le Protectorat'. *Review Africaine* 1954, XCVIII, in Soumille 1981, 33.

36. Hartmayer, 'Dossiers du caïdat de Djerba', *Archaeology general du gouvernement tunisien à la kasbah*, 172.

In March of that year numbers had reached 47 (35 Europeans and 12 Muslims). A teaching assistant was attached to the school to give the Muslims literacy lessons in their own language.

Apparently in the mid 20th century there was plenty of fun to be had at social occasions organised by the parish, much to the merriment and disbelief of local lads, who watched through uncurtained windows and who had never themselves experienced the close embrace of a quickstep or waltz.³⁷

First hand experience

One first hand account, which may have parallels, relates how a trader born Malta, *circa* 1850, was running a locally based maritime transport system, trading to Tripoli and Sfax. He made the decision to base his operation in Djerba.³⁸ Possibly because Malta had been through a severe recession coinciding with a period of relative prosperity in the Barbary states. He came to Djerba with his two brothers and their wives and they rented a house in Houmt Souk near the fish market next to



Fig. 6. 'To get the truck across to Djerba they had to put a few planks on a ferry and run it aboard'

the Mosque of Strangers. They were self supporting, even making their own wine. There were three male children born to this generation, one brother was killed in the Great War, another ran a land transport business in Gabes and the elder son, born Djerba *circa* 1880, took over the family concern. However as the Dutch requisitioned all Djerban shipping during the First World War this resourceful family developed a successful timber business in Djerba. The eldest child born to that generation, a male, in Djerba *circa* 1910, followed in his father's footsteps. Two of his sisters subsequently married into French families and a brother migrated to French occupied Algeria. In fact, after 1918, in recognition of their sacrifices, foreigners resident in Tunisia could opt for French citizenship. Primary education was provided on the island. The Gabes based transport system came in useful in securing secondary education in Tunis. To get the truck across to Djerba they had to put a few planks on a ferry and run it aboard (Figure 6).

To judge from photographs these families appear to have had a good standard of life and some social standing, no doubt through hard work. Apart from the usual studio portraits, family 'snaps' show fashionable clothes and tennis parties, in fact a relaxed, care free 'European' style existence. Maltese was spoken in the home and marriages were usually within the community. All three generations counted on the loyalty of the same Tunisian family for domestic help.

Tunisia: The Labour Contract

Since the Treaty of Bardo in 1883 Tunisia became a French Protectorate. In 1929 a Labour Contract was negotiated between the French and the Maltese Governments, whereby Maltese workers of every category could be engaged in Malta by a Representative of the Office Gratuit du Placement des Français en Tunisie. Men were employed with proper safeguards and on the same conditions of labour and at the same wages as French workers. This ensured stability of work and largely eliminated the seasonal and opportunist character of previous endeavour.

Nearly a century after the first wave of Maltese settlers a French politician publicly described these migrants as 'excellent elements, hardworking, honest, and French at heart ... as they were in the pioneering days of the nineteenth century they are welcome always and in any numbers.'³⁹ Maltese appear to have proved so acceptable because of their vigour, excellent working habits and their great powers of assimilation. By sheer hard work, honest industry and straight dealing the Maltese, both in Tunisia and in Algeria, had invariably been looked upon as the best colonists. Some became wealthy industrialists, there were also thousands of artisans and labourers. Through their action many difficulties were smoothed among Arabs and French colonials, between whom they were the friendly link in the early days of the protectorate.

37. Pers. comm. Ingrid Ben Hamida, 2003.

38. pers. comm. JL (née Camilleri), 2003.

39. H. Casolini, *Awake Malta*. Malta Government Printing Press 1930, 73.

In the 21st century that ethnic community exists only in the archive, in a dwindling number of artefacts and in the memory of a few.

Acknowledgements

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