

## THE LANGUAGE QUESTION IN MALTA

### I

THE Islands of Malta and Gozo are situated midway between Europe and Africa. Scientists contend that they are but the remains of a natural bridge which, in the oldest pre-historical times, united the two continents. To-day, these Islands are about fifty miles from Sicily and one hundred and eighty miles from the nearest point of Africa. They occupy almost the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, the theatre, up to 1492 when America was discovered, of all that written history records of past civilizations which grew and flourished round its shores. This has exercised a predominant influence on the Maltese Islands, which changed destiny and fortune with the rise of each new power holding sway in the Mediterranean Sea: Malta, since the remotest times, has always belonged to the strongest naval Power.

Archaeological remains on the Island speak of a civilization much older than that of the Phoenicians. These people knew Malta as a place of shelter, and confined themselves to its shores. But it is difficult to trace the race to which the aborigines belonged. All the theories on the subject are mere guess-work. A clue, however, of importance is to be found in the teeth of the so-called Neanderthal Man discovered during excavations at Ghar Dalam, and constituting a scientific basis to the much credited theory that Malta once formed a pillar of a bridge between Europe and Africa.

An event of paramount influence in the history of these Islands took place in the year 58 (some say A.D. 60); St. Paul, while travelling from Jerusalem to Rome on his way to Caesar, was shipwrecked, and landed in Malta. Since then the Maltese have been Catholics. Moreover, the Maltese are one hundred per cent. Catholics, and they take pride in the fact that no schism or heresy (of the hundreds which arose both in the Western and Eastern Churches) ever succeeded in shaking their faith in the

Church of Christ, as headed by Peter and his successors in the See of Rome. Almost twenty centuries of continual Apostolic succession have rendered Malta very dear to the Popes, who are held by the Maltese people in great veneration. When St. Paul came to it, Malta was under the Romans. Since then the history of Malta is nothing but a particular episode of the history of Europe, reaching, however, at least on two occasions—the first in 1565 against the Turks, the second in 1798 against Napoleon—the importance of determining, by its stand in these two struggles, a turn in the destinies of Europe and of the world.

The population of the Maltese Islands is at present about 250,000.

Maltese is the language of the people, though English and Italian are also spoken, the former being more diffused. Certain experts maintain that Maltese is a language, whilst others consider it to be a mere dialect. Whether a dialect or a language, Maltese is a sort of Arabic and belongs to the semitic group, both grammatically and philologically. It is difficult to say whether Maltese is a monument of the Saracen domination of Malta, Sicily and a great part of Spain—during the Arab sway over Europe which lasted in Malta for a period of over two hundred years—or whether its appearance in these Islands is to be dated further back. Unfortunately, political bias and prejudice have of late tried to make science subservient to politics, and to make Maltese itself a tool for political purposes. One section of politicians, with an incorrect historical idea of what the Arabs really were, would not have Maltese styled Arabic, considering such an assertion as humiliating. Others help them in this attitude under the false notion that 'Arabic' implies a coloured people. These pretend Maltese to be Phœnician, or something of the kind. They call it a language and feign an interest in its revival as such. On the other hand, there are those who call it a dialect out of spite, looking upon it as impressed on us by our Saracen masters in an epoch of slavery. The

former take their attitude in order to wage war on Italian and have English and Maltese alone in the social life of Malta; the latter take their attitude from the contrary angle, in defence of the position of Italian as the language of Maltese intellectual expression, fearing that when Italian is done away with, Maltese will be recognized as being unadaptable for the higher expressions of the mind, and the Maltese people will have to fall back on English, and English only. This they look upon as a national calamity, for they are proud of having been civilized for many centuries before their British connection and of having already had a name, a civil status and a history in the annals of the world.

We are thus faced with a language question which foreigners, unless they keep in view what we have said, will never be able to understand.

Whether a dialect or a language, Maltese remains always the tongue of only 250,000 people. That figure, if made higher to include the rest of the Maltese scattered throughout the world, might change its two into three. These 250,000 inhabitants are centred in an island in the midst of the Mediterranean where Arabic, Italian and French are dominant. It should be emphasised in relation to Maltese abroad that before France and Italy controlled Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers and Morocco, the Maltese, equipped with their native tongue and their language of culture, Italian, were the real masters in the Barbary States. In every town in Africa, the Maltese Colony is still considered as one of the oldest and as including some of the wealthiest, certainly the most influential personages, of European stock. When that is said, all has been said as to the possibility which a knowledge of Maltese can give. Maltese, from the first time it was written, dropped its Semitic garb and adopted the Roman alphabet. To-day one of the best authorities on it tells us that in its lexicon it contains more than eight thousand neo-Latin words. What is of the greatest importance to remember is that the Maltese language struck off for good from its place of

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origin to develop and evolve according to European thoughts and civilization. In so doing it abandoned all those sounds and words which were not fitted for its new civilization; picked up others which new views and ideas suggested, borrowing in the process considerably from its neighbour Italy, or better from Sicily, which is the nearest part of Italy to Malta. These are facts which cannot be disputed and much less ignored. They are not facts of to-day. They have been working themselves out for centuries. That is why the Maltese themselves, for the higher needs of life and for its higher expressions, had to have recourse to another language. Maltese does not go beyond the stage of being studied by orientalists as one of the branches of the Semitic group. It does not go beyond the literary stage of being used in popular verse or popular songs. It is only of late that scholars matured in the literatures of other languages, particularly Italian, have tried with success to put it into a real literary form. Long before the need was felt for another language capable of expressing all the higher needs of the spirit, Africa had been abandoned for good, and Europe was looked upon as the continent to which Malta should belong, and the nearest point of Europe was Italy. Moreover, Italian had already assumed importance as a romantic language after the decay of spoken Latin at the royal court of Frederick the Suabian, King of Sicily and of Malta. Since then (1200 A.D.) the language of culture of the Maltese has always been Italian.

That is how the Italian language came into the life of the Maltese people: it came as a spiritual necessity. Maltese could not satisfy the standard of their intellectual development. The records of legislative measures, of deeds between citizens referring in particular to the ownership of immovables, of the rules and regulations governing the trades and the arts, of the literary activities of those who had received a University education, and, above all, of the teaching in the Higher Schools and Universities, were all written in Italian. Malta, after the Saracen period and up

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to 1530, when it passed by a decree of the Emperor Charles V under the Knights of St. John, was governed successively by Normans, Spaniards, Suabians, Angevins, and Aragonese. Notwithstanding the differences between these dominations, the greater part of the documents existing in our archives—especially whenever the people of Malta are concerned—are drawn up in the Italian language. As everybody knows, Italian took a long time before it had definite form as a written language: now the archives of Malta bear testimony to its development from one century to the other, until it attained under the Order of St. John its accredited form of to-day. Again, the Order was of a cosmopolitan character. The Italian Knights cannot be said to have been either the most numerous or the most important. It suffices to remember that out of the twenty-eight Grand Masters who reigned in Malta from 1530 to 1798, only four belonged to the *langue d'Italie*. Nevertheless, even under the Order (though for its official purposes Latin was adopted), Italian is invariably met with whenever the people of Malta are concerned. The first written legislation in the form of a code, the *Consolato del Mare* issued by Grand Master Perellos, a Spaniard or Portuguese, is in Italian. The next code, *Le Prammatiche* of Grand Master Manoel, a Frenchman, is also in Italian; *Il Codice Municipale* by Grand Master De Rohan, another Frenchman, is in Italian, too. The French Republic next governed Malta. Napoleon caused all public documents to be printed in Italian as well as in French. The Official Gazette was in Italian and French. Even the Napoleonic Code was adopted here in its Italian version. The same is true of all decrees and other legislative measures issued in the name of the Republic *Una ed indivisibile*. When the Maltese rebelled against the French and restored a popular Government, the language used was Italian. It was even in Italian that they implored His Britannic Majesty to take them under his protection. Ball, Cameron, Ponsonby, who were the first governors of the English regime in Malta, issued their proclamations to the Maltese

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in Italian. It was in Italian that the news was given by Ball that His Britannic Majesty had accepted the protectorate of the Maltese. The legislative reforms introduced by Maitland were all in Italian. Italian was the official language of His Majesty's Maltese Regiments up to 1840.

Prior to the Institution of our University in 1769, Malta had a *Collegio degli studi*, under the Jesuits since 1595. After they had been expelled, Grand Master Pinto issued a decree creating a University, and that decree was also drawn up in Italian; the nomination of the protector and rector of the University in 1771 is also in Italian; even the decree of abolition of the University by Napoleon, dated 30 Prairial 1798, is in Italian. After the expulsion of the French, Sir Alexander Ball decided to re-open the University and appointed Canon Caruana as Rector, in Italian. The decision taken by Ball, two years later in 1802, that the degrees should be again given with the usual solemnity of the past, is in Italian. The language used by professors at the University was Italian.

When, on behalf of His Britannic Majesty, Ball and Cameron assured the Maltese that in taking them under their protection His Majesty guaranteed to them the full enjoyment of their laws, customs, religion and language, His Britannic Majesty entered with the Maltese nation into a solemn compact, which to the astonishment of our people, His Majesty's Ministers in England, particularly in connection with the language question, and lately also with regard to religion, have on several occasions thought fit to ignore.

Malta is the only country in the British Commonwealth of Nations which of its own free will came under the British Flag. When the Treaty of Paris in 1814 assigned these Islands to Great Britain, England had already been in Malta for fourteen years. The tablet commemorating the event of 1814 erected on the Main Guard says: *Melitenisium amor et Europae vox has insulas magnae et invictae Britanniae confirmat*. The Treaty of Paris was a confirmation, a ratification of the already existing pact.

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We only asked for protection. We had our own laws, our own tribunals, our own university, our own institutions. The ratification of Paris followed His Britannic Majesty's pledges of our complete enjoyment of our national life as a civilized community.

Now the present war on the Italian language (which constitutes the expression of our soul as a nation) is due first to a sudden awakening of the Imperial authorities to the fact that they had neglected to help the Maltese to learn and understand the English which was necessary for them in their new status.

When the awakening took place, Malta had been almost thirty years under British rule. Instead of the far-reaching wise policy of the French, who placed French by the side of Italian, the responsible authorities adopted the policy of eliminating Italian altogether. These violent reforms banned Italian as the medium language of instruction in the schools. Instrumental in this direction was a Maltese politician of mark, Sigismondo Savona, who later repented when he saw that his efforts were really efforts to stifle the voice of the spirit of the nation. He was followed by another politician, half Maltese and half English, Gerald Strickland, who went a step further by forbidding the teaching of Italian in the elementary schools, and by trying to cripple it in the secondary schools and the University. With the fury of an iconoclast, Gerald Strickland, then Chief Secretary to the Government, carried the war on Italian from the schools to the tribunals. It reached its height in the proclamation of the imperial despatch of 1899, which completely abolished Italian and substituted English for it, the change to be completed within fifteen years.

Never was jingoism guilty of a harsher crime. The smallest people perhaps on the face of the earth, undoubtedly the smallest community of the Empire, who, but a few years before had asked Great Britain's protection after redeeming their own liberties and rights in fighting against

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the French under Napoleon, were being crushed. Why? Because they refused to renounce their spiritual inheritance, centuries old; an inheritance which Great Britain had been and is solemnly pledged not only to respect, but also to defend! The results of such a policy were obvious. Malta, an Imperial fortress in the Mediterranean, could not tolerate the consequence of such a violent attempt against its rights and liberties, for, even though peaceful by nature and small in number, they had in their past the record of splendid heroism in their stand against tyrants. Ultimately better counsel prevailed. It was on all sides accepted that English, the language of the Empire, should be given a position of importance in the life of the Island. In truth, there has never been on the part of the Maltese or their representatives any antagonism or hostility to the teaching of English. The presence of the fleet and the garrison, the increasing trade with England and other places in the Empire, the existence in Malta of an important dockyard, these, and other reasons, militated in favour of the teaching and speaking of English. What was highly resented was the unwarranted intolerance of the authorities against Italian in all quarters. The position opened the way to a new agreement, tacitly effected and put in practice, of a *pari-passu* system, by which Italian and English, each being important, not to say indispensable, to the life of Malta, were to be taught simultaneously in all government schools. Sir John Clauson, one of the successors of Gerald Strickland in office, was responsible for this arrangement by which, to make use of his own phrase, Italian and English were to be considered as 'the Siamese twins.'

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(To be continued)