

Mr. President, Madam Director of the Museum of Asian Art, friends of the "Albert Cohen Corfu" Association, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Responding to the invitation of the "Albert Cohen Corfu" Association, we participate with great honor in tonight's festive event. The issue of Maltese immigration in Greece and particularly in Corfu, where the largest relevant population survives to this day, either from an academic and research point of view, or as a memory of the descendants of those first migratory flows, evokes mixed feelings and trivial, sometimes, associations. As far as I am concerned and have been defined by it, the stories and testimonies of my elders, the remains of relics, the testimonies about the trials and survival in stone age, have always caused me a deep emotion and the need to constantly revisit information and sources about this distant origin, its consequences and... inconsistencies through time.

One of the main features of the history of the Maltese archipelago is the very history of the movements of its inhabitants, a history that is lost in the mists of time. A rocky dot in the heart of the Mediterranean basin, Malta has been inhabited, conquered or colonised since early Neolithic times: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Sicilians and the Sovereign Military and Hospitaller Order of St John of Jerusalem - when it abandoned Rhodes after its fall to the Ottomans - all sought a safe haven in the Maltese archipelago. During the presence of the Knights, the island's defences were strengthened, the great fortification monuments were built, which to this day characterise the special architectural physiognomy of the place, the arts, education, trade and navigation were cultivated, while the self-sacrifice and resistance of the people of Ioannina and the locals in 1565, during the great Ottoman siege, changed the course of European history. The Order of St John's rule in Malta was broken when the French soldiers of Napoleon Bonaparte, on their way to the great campaign in Egypt, conquered the island in 1798, while the British occupied it two years later, turning it into a protectorate. In 1814, under the Treaty of Paris, Malta became part of the British Empire, in which it remained until independence in 1964. A historical course intertwined and parallel to that of the occupation of the Ionian Islands by the British, with the national restoration of Malta, however, being delayed for another hundred years.

The composition and density of the population in the Maltese archipelago has long been recorded as one of the highest and fastest growing internationally, which has regularly caused survival problems for the natives. To this end, in the early years of the 19th century, various destinations near or far were proposed, but in most cases, attempts at migration or colonisation failed due to lack of planning, financial resources and organisation. Of course, being forced to leave one's land and people in search of hope for a better life in a foreign land has never proved easy or pleasant. Therefore, it is not appropriate or fair to approach the phenomenon of Maltese emigration solely in terms of the low standard of living of 19th century Maltese people, high levels of unemployment and slow rates of growth, which were added to the galloping pace of demographic growth on the island. However, since the history of the two Ionian clusters, Malta and the Ionian Islands, has many features in common and some of these were the social and cultural experimentation and cultural exchanges attempted by the various despotisms, protections and military occupations, the migration of the Maltese to the British-occupied Ionian Islands and especially to Corfu, is historically certain to have been instigated by the British administration, which was in political and military control.

It was instigated as a selective and, for the most part, organized, though not always desirable, movement of people of known technological education and ethics, and not as a motivated transfer of an economically weak and economically underprivileged community of migrants, of rural employment, who for about a century would live as outcasts on the outskirts of Corfu town, renting land from the state or from local landowners.

Nevertheless, the first immigrants in both Corfu and Kefalonia went through a huge culture shock and were tested under conditions of essential entrapment between two different cultures. The religious and social ferment of the time and their economic poverty isolated them considerably and the rare missions of a visiting priest or a representative of the Maltese government were not enough to cope with the insecurity, illiteracy, poverty, labour exploitation, Protestant conversion and abstinence from the sacraments. As if this were not enough, the fear of epidemics and other diseases, far from Malta, caused greater fear and anxiety to those who, despite the adversity, still wished to emigrate.

The Maltese, mainly economic immigrants destined for Corfu, political exiles, skilled craftsmen and artists in the service of the British forces, as well as experienced farmers, would form a mosaic of about a thousand souls until the early years of the twentieth century, linked by their language, traditions and their deep Catholic faith. This was clearly a stream, along with that of the Continentals, Jews, Pugliese and Sicilians, in the same period, which made a decisive contribution to the reshaping of the local social, demographic, religious, cultural and political landscape of the period. Nevertheless, although the Maltese peasants who worked in Corfu, regardless of acquiring British citizenship or obtaining Greek citizenship, remained the class with the heaviest labour and the worst social conditions, they were additionally accused of threatening the jobs of local workers, despite earning only a third of a Corfiot farmer's wage or even, sometimes, receiving their pay in the form of basic daily goods rather than money. As a result of this discrimination and lack of means, there was poverty and arriviste attitudes that inevitably led many cases of migrants, especially in the early years, to extreme or delinquent behaviour.

In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, official reports and letters from immigrants to their families in Malta described a climate of isolationism and prejudice. The Government and the Archdiocese of Malta decided to study the situation and commissioned the newly formed Order of Franciscan Friars of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to establish a school for the Corfu immigrants and their children. On the morning of May 29, 1907, three young Catholic nuns, the founder of the Order Margherita De Brincat, the first local abbess Nazarena Gouder and Benedetta Gauci, arrived at the port of Corfu and twenty days later received permission to begin classes, inaugurating the first small, at the beginning, school. The foundation of this school is one of the most important minority or parochial educational initiatives that developed in Corfu, at least until the first post-war decades. Its uninterrupted operation radically favoured both the development and the socialisation of a large part of the Corfiot population with Maltese roots, who lived marginalised on the outskirts of Corfu town.

It took them several decades from their first settlement to succeed -gradually- to integrate into the social fabric of Corfu, as this workforce and their children, who at that time did not exceed two percent of the local population, lived for a whole century, after their settlement in Corfu,

under a regime of legal uncertainty and provisionality. This uncertainty of the parents and their job insecurity could not fail to have a negative impact on the integration of the children into the school environment. Moreover, the low standard of living of Maltese parents inevitably led to very low expectations and there was no encouragement for their children to continue, at least in the first century since their settlement in Corfu, their secondary education.

As the majority of the children of Maltese immigrants, the majority of whom were born in Corfu, were systematically absent from education, since they were employed daily in agricultural work or contributed to the family business, the great challenge of the nuns was to force them to attend school classes, where priority was given to the teaching of the Greek language, in order to speed up the assimilation of the young students into the Greek environment. A radical move, but where the choice of teachers and teaching material was the prerogative of the Greek inspector of public education, who determined everything related to the school curriculum and examinations, protecting the cultural specificity of the locals. These political restrictions were capable of driving the children of Maltese immigrants away from their roots and assimilating them into the regenerated Greek environment after the various foreign conquests. A series of compulsory laws that followed, concerning the obligation of Maltese-Corfiots to register in the registers of the Municipality of Corfu and to become naturalized Greeks, contributed, despite their strict enforcement, to the faster integration of the descendants of Maltese immigrants into the Greek environment. The phenomenon of Maltese immigration, therefore, was not able, despite the initial English aspirations, to threaten the demographic and traditional cultural character of Greece.

In the publication that will be distributed to you later, you will read the statistical and demographic data as well as the surnames of the families that formed the first waves of migration to Corfu. This publication of the Albert Cohen Association of Corfu aspires to present, through an indicative selection of documents, memorabilia and photographic material, aspects of the history of the Maltese who settled in Corfu from the beginning of the 19th century to the early years of the 20th century and the way in which they were integrated into the local society. At the same time, it highlights the distinctions obtained by many members of the Maltese community, their performance in various international exhibitions and the role they played in the development of the local society. The influences they exerted in the development of the means of agricultural production, building works, initially in the service of the British forces in the construction and decoration of the palace that is our host tonight, but also many other public works and infrastructure, usually in Maltese stone, are reflected.

Special reference is made to representatives of the visual and decorative arts, but also to those of the lyrical theatre, music and philharmonic societies, in whose development Maltese musicians and composers such as Karavana, Kamilieri and Greck played a prominent role. The important role of Maltese immigrants and their descendants in the field of transport, trade, manufacturing, silversmithing, gastronomy and sport, where Corfiot descendants of Maltese immigrants have honoured and continue to honour on dozens of occasions the colours of the Corfu teams. Above all, their role in the field of charity as a means of social solidarity and giving, but also in the wider ecclesiastical life. Finally, aspects of their daily life and their interactions within the mutual aid associations and the church organizations they founded are

vividly presented, as well as information about their school and nursing home, through their relationship with the Franciscan nuns from Malta, which is maintained and evolving to this day.

From the bosom of this community emerged personalities whose work is preserved in local history: lawyers, doctors and executives of the construction sector, people who served consistently and wisely in the artistic, academic, political and social fields, choral music, science and letters.

They are the descendants of those people of whom a French consul in Corfu, Ramir Vadala, wrote almost a century ago that 'the immigrant from Malta relies neither on the Government nor on generous benefactors. Simple in his ways and industrious, he trusts nothing but his own hands, and with great courage, vigour and hard work he follows whatever road leads him to friends and relatives. Wherever he goes he will succeed in living with dignity and prudence, and most often reaps the success and honor that come with them.'

But today, for the Maltese people, this day has a special meaning and value. Today, the seventh of June, or Sette Giugno as it has been historically recorded, is one of the five national anniversaries of the Republic of Malta. Every year, like today, the Maltese Parliament commemorates the protests that took place in the British Crown Colony on 7 June 1919 when British troops violently suppressed the riots of Maltese militants who were opposing the rising cost of living and production. In the aftermath of the First World War, with the economy and means of production dramatically faltering, the colonial government of Malta had failed to provide an adequate supply of basic foodstuffs to the islands. Imports were limited and as food became scarce prices rose, leading to abuse and illicit trade.

Shipyards workers, students, local police, postal workers and farmers had already started demonstrations and strikes in mid-February, demanding economic and political reforms. A fundamental cause of the uprising was also the political developments instigated by the nationalist party. The first session of the National Assembly, held on 25 February 1919, had adopted a resolution wishing Malta all the rights enjoyed by the victorious Allied powers following the Versailles Peace Conference, which they hoped would mean independence from the British Empire. The riots and the British colonial government's response to them led to increased anti-colonial sentiment among the Maltese public, while extreme political formations from Italy that had infiltrated the island's political affairs saw the riots as an opportunity to promote Italian irredentism in Malta.

Although the British administration tried to avoid any armed reaction, the crowd and the intensity of the demonstrations, the occupation of public buildings and the destruction of state infrastructure led to a counter-attack and with the spark of unrest ignited by the lowering of the British flag and its destruction, the reaction was inevitable, leaving four Maltese workers dead. The riots continued for another week and subsided when the new Governor, who hastily took over the government, recommended liberal concessions to the Maltese, phasing out

political censorship, which led two years later to the first elections held under the new constitution and the election of new political formations.

For centuries now, and even more so in the last two, the relations between Corfu and Malta have been firmly established in historical time and the contribution of our fellow citizens of Maltese origin to the development and progress of Corfiot society is recognized as particularly important. To these people, to the generations who worked hard and with honesty so that their own children as Corfiots and as Greek citizens could prosper in this place, earning the sympathy and respect of their fellow countrymen, to these people who died digging day and night in this Corfiot land, to these people tonight is dedicated.

Spyros P. Gaoutsis

Greeting at the event of the Albert Cohen Association at the Museum of Asian Art.