Cross Currents in Emigration:
Corporal A. M. Benscher and the proposed Maltese settlement in the Holy Land

David Mallia

Emigration

Emigration is the act of leaving one's native country to settle in another: when the conditions of life in a country become too arduous, people set off to look elsewhere in search of an easier existence.

Life in Malta became increasingly difficult towards the late eighteenth century and conditions worsened considerably during the nineteenth century. This was largely due to the relentless rise in the population and the suppression of piracy from which many Maltese had made a good living. Relief only came in time of war, during which emergency naval work guaranteed full-employment, and emigration seemed to be the only viable option. Two forms of emigration emerged: spontaneous emigration to North Africa, which was tolerated by the British authorities, despite, the generally 'not excellent' relations with France. However, the British authorities were well aware of the potential consequences of the excessive population of the Maltese islands, particularly in the event of a siege. From the 1820's, a number of schemes were formulated to encourage the Maltese to leave their homeland and to search for a better life. The proposed destinations varied from the distant Brazil to nearby Cyprus. For various reasons (which are not the subject of this paper), these efforts were generally not very successful, since few Maltese wished to go so far from their homeland, particularly when so many of their compatriots were

1 The author wishes to thank the Benscher family in England and the United States for their generous and unstinting assistance in the research leading to this paper; also the librarian of the JKM - Jesuit Krauss McKormic - Library (Chicago) for providing free scans of some documents; and finally Mr & Mrs A. Abrahams for their assistance.


3 Miege, op. cit. passim - Miege's history of Malta reveals that the islands generally thrived in times of war.

4 ibid.

5 C. A. Price, Malta and the Maltese: A Study in Nineteenth Century Migration, Melbourne 1954, 35.
doing so well in the nearby French colonies of North Africa. Furthermore, as a general rule, British policy was against the use of public funds for the financing of emigration projects and travel costs to more distant colonies tended to be beyond the pockets of the poor. This is a story of two crosscurrents in world migration, one from east to west and the other from west to east. The brief interaction between these two currents, which occurred in Malta towards the end of the First World War, had a somewhat unanticipated backlash, particularly if judged by today’s standards of political correctness.

Jewish emigration westwards

The emigration of Jews from Russia began in the seventeenth century because of the Chmielniki massacres and continued in earnest following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. During the reigns of Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II many Jews left Russia and settled in Western Europe, where the attitude towards them was only marginally more liberal. Consideration of Emile Zola’s open letter to the president of the French Republic entitled *J’accuse*, published in the newspaper *L’Aurore* on January 13, 1898 regarding the Dreyfus case and George Eliot’s social novel *Daniel Deronda* published in 1876 in Britain give an indication of the ambivalent attitudes of even the most liberal Western European societies at the time. It is no wonder that many Jews sought to re-emigrate to the United States.

The Benscher-DeWitz Family Migration

In 1869, Kaiser Wilhelm I gave unprecedented rights to German Jews, which included the right to attend a university and work as professionals in Germany. One such beneficiary of this emancipation was a certain Alfred Benscher, who obtained a Law degree in Nuremberg. His mother Bianca Dewitz’s family had emigrated westwards from Tütz (in modern Poland) to Frankfurt-on-the-Oder, before marrying his father, Simon Benscher. The couple already had two children, Georg who died in infancy, and Waldemar born in 1886, before they moved west to Berlin, where Simon ran a leather business. Dr Alfred, their youngest son, and two of his elder

---

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
9 JC. London May 6, 1881, 9.
12 www.ancestry.com and personal communication with Barbara Keely Benscher and Peter Benscher.
brothers, Waldemar and Martin, emigrated to England in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but Alfred eventually settled in the United States of America, dying in New York in 1930.\footnote{15}

His brother Waldemar, who became a naturalized British subject in 1895,\footnote{16} was an importer and merchant of leather goods.\footnote{17} He had previously married Rachel Marks, three years his senior, on October 7, 1884\footnote{18} and their first child, Aubrey Martin, was born a month later.\footnote{19} He was followed by Claud in 1887, Vivian in 1888, Blanche in 1890 and Leo in 1893. Claud died in infancy and Vivian died in 1907 after falling off a ladder at home.

Waldemar was a pillar of the community and was instrumental in the establishment of Hebrew and Religious classes at the Dalston Synagogue in 1896, where he held the post of Chairman of the Education Committee and Hon. Superintendent of the Classes.\footnote{20} He also pioneered the establishment of The North London Jewish Literary and Social Union in 1897 for which he acted as provisional chairman.

In 1913, Waldemar left England for Canada and prior to his departure he was presented with a testimonial\footnote{21} by the Senior Warden of the Brondesbury Synagogue during a moving farewell ceremony.\footnote{22} He remained in Canada between 1913 and 1920,\footnote{23} during which time he visited his brother Alfred in New York at least twice.\footnote{24} He returned to England in 1920\footnote{25} and died on the January 15, 1925 aged 69. He was survived by his widow Rachel, who died in 1938, and his three surviving children: Aubrey, Blanche and Leo.

Aubrey Benscher, whose bar mitzvah had been celebrated at the Brondesbury Synagogue in 1897,\footnote{26} became a stationer's clerk soon after.\footnote{27} He followed his father's footsteps in being active in the Brondesbury synagogue where he is recorded as being a representative of its council from 1911.\footnote{28} He also led the 'rambles' of the Brondesbury Jewish Ladies' Club.\footnote{29}

At the outbreak of the First World War, he joined the Army Service Corps and was subsequently transferred to the Royal Fusiliers as an Acting Corporal.\footnote{30} Some of London's East End Territorial units became part of the fourth (City of London) Battalion (Royal Fusiliers) after 1908. At the start of the First World War, the fourth Battalion was sent out to Malta as a Territorial Unit to enable regular Army troops to be returned to France.\footnote{31} The Jewish Chronicle, reporting this,\footnote{32} noted that there were 32 Jews in the unit. From time to time, the companies of the fourth Battalion stationed in Malta were redeployed at different fronts and new companies were brought in to replace them for duties on the island.\footnote{33} It was thus that Aubrey Benscher spent two years\footnote{34} (1917–9) in Malta during the First World War, based at Old Laboratory Barracks.\footnote{35}

During his stay in Malta Aubrey conducted fortnightly services for Jewish soldiers in hospitals and those stationed in outlying districts,\footnote{36} such as those at the Ghajn Tuffieha, Selmun and Mellieha Camps, in which it is recorded that it was the first time that a battalion remained under canvas in Malta even during the winter.\footnote{37} After the services, which were generally well attended, those present were sometimes entertained to tea by Mr and Mrs Achilles J. Tayar, President of the Jewish Congregation in Malta.\footnote{38} Mr Tayar was instrumental in assisting and doing much good work for Jewish soldiers, and Jewish prisoners of war, in Malta.\footnote{39} Living conditions for the soldiers carrying out prisoner of war guard duty at Verdala, or officer's guard duty at the Governor's Palace in Valletta and guards over various government depots, such as the Laboratory Barracks,\footnote{40} must have been considerably better.

Like all soldiers in the British Army who served and survived the First World War, Aubrey was awarded the Allied Victory Medal and the British War Medal.\footnote{41} During
World War I, the island was neither invaded nor attacked and its chief involvement in the conflict was the hosting of the largest military hospital in the Mediterranean, as well as an important naval dockyard. Life on the islands for the soldiers stationed there must have afforded considerable opportunity for diversion and relaxation. During his two-year stay on the island, Aubrey sent a letter for publication in the *Jewish Chronicle*, praising the establishment's assistance with transporting the wounded to the synagogue for the Passover services in 1917.* At that time, the Jewish community on Malta had dwindled to some sixty persons but as a result of the war there was a considerable influx of Jews to the island in the form of British soldiers or Turkish/Bulgarian prisoners of war. However, his experiences on the island left a deep impression on him, as can be ascertained by his subsequent correspondence published in the *Jewish Chronicle*, a publication with considerable influence derived from its long-standing reputation and wide readership. In particular, the death of his cousin Gilbert Alfred in action at the Palestine Front on December 9, 1917, **

41 Letter from Aubrey Benscher to the Editor of the JC, May 11, 1917, 18-19.
42 Roth, 250.
43 The JC was founded in 1841 and it is still published weekly in London.
44 See in memoriam published by his family in JC, December 7, 1934, 13.
coming one month after the Balfour Declaration, must have strongly heightened his feelings about Palestine.

**The Maltese and Palestine - Early Maltese settlers in Palestine**

Maltese links with the Holy Land date back considerably. As early as 1553, Sulaqa Patriarch of Mosul asked Pope Julius III to support his new mission following the creation of the Chaldean Catholic Church. He sent him the Dominican, Ambrose Buttigieg, as representative of Holy See to the Chaldeans of Mosul, and Dominican Maltese Antoninus Zahara. In 1704, the port of Haifa was branded as La petite Malte because the Turkish governor of Sidon could not enforce his authority there. This gave a free hand to the Maltese (and other European) pirates in the bay of Haifa, which they utilised as a maintenance base. The pirates may have had some contact with the Franciscan monks in the Convent on Mount Carmel nearby, as well as some of the Christian inhabitants in Haifa. Business activities with Maltese pirates were developed still further when the Dutchman Paul Maashook served as vice-consul for Britain and the Netherlands in Acre. This association seems to have continued well into the second decade of the eighteenth century. The reputation of the Maltese was such that in 1837 it was reported to the Pilgrim Mission’s Committee in Basel that: [Governor] Ibrahim Pasha had no objection to bringing German colonists into the fertile plain of Jezreel, although he would not hear of colonists from Malta, where the Missionary Society had established a strong base for its Mission in 1815. However, there must have been a number of Maltese missionaries in various cities of the Holy Land, since in 1850 a Maltese nun of the Order of the Sister of Charity of St Joseph is mentioned as one of the four European nuns running schools in the area around Jerusalem.

The unlikely alliance between the Fredrick William IV, King of Prussia and the Archbishop of Canterbury led to the establishment of the (Protestant) See of Jerusalem in 1841. Agitation for its establishment had been fomented by the London Missionary Society, spearheaded by the Danish pastor John Nicolayson, who did not wait for the results of diplomacy between London and Constantinople, before he started work on the new Anglican Church in which Maltese masons were employed. The decision to employ Maltese masons linked the project into the British imperial economy. His preference for Maltese, rather than Arab masons, was concerned with representation prestige.

**The Franciscans**

The Maltese Franciscans have always been connected with the Franciscan Custodia Terrae Sanctae, (the Custody of the Holy Land) since its founding in 1230. Until the Second World War almost all the Maltese Franciscans had given some time of service in the Holy Land. It is recorded that Br Celsius Micallef was wounded in front of the Holy Sepulchre while defending the sanctuary. Others, like Br Nicholas

45 The declaration, reflecting the position taken by the British Cabinet, was made in a letter from Foreign Secretary Balfour to Baron Rothschild. It favoured the setting up of a National Home for Jewish People in Palestine.

46 H. Kildani, Almamasiie almahasasa fi'urdun wafi'palasten (History of Modern Christianity in the Holy Land), Amman 1993, unpaginated.

47 A. Cohen, Ottoman rule and the emergence of the coast of Palestine, in Cathedra 34, Tel Aviv 1985, 167.

48 Ibid.


50 Kildani.


52 Brown, Official Handbook of EAST and WEST Missionary Exhibition, New Zealand 1926, 22.
Borg, an architect and builder, completely rebuilt the Franciscan church of St Saviour in Jerusalem. Numerous Maltese friars were also nominated superiors at sanctuaries like those in Nazareth, Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Two Maltese friars were even elected as Custos of the Holy Land, Fr Saviour Anthony Vassallo and Fr Francis Xavier Bugeja, during whose time the Custos also had jurisdiction outside Palestine since he had been nominated as Apostolic Prefect of Cyprus and Egypt and Apostolic Commissar of the East. The Maltese Franciscan presence in the Holy Land can thus be said to have acted as a stimulus for a variety of other Maltese settlers in the region throughout modern history.

A Scheme to settle Maltese in Palestine - The aftermath of the Great War in Malta

A description of Malta given by one of the officers of the Royal Fusiliers stationed in Malta during the First World War informs us that:

'The population of Malta in 1907 was 206,690, and this phenomenal congestion renders it largely dependent on imported foodstuffs. ... The chief industry is the production of Maltese lace, which employs some 5000 women and children. The principal resources of the island are derived from the fact of its being an important military station and the Headquarters of the Mediterranean fleet, the prolonged absence of which always produces distress.'

Relief from the economic depression and social misery that occurred in Malta during the early twentieth century came in the form of the First World War. Work was plentiful owing to the increased employment at the dry-docks and to recruitment with the British Forces, and this meant that despite the escalating cost of living most people could still make ends meet. Emigration to Canada, Australia and New Zealand had been prohibited for all Maltese Fenech. 21 NAM, CSGB6.23, January 30, 1919 and NAM. CSGB1 telegram dated March 14, 1919. D.

At the end of the war, many people fondly thought that there would be a swift return to pre-war: however, that way of life was over for good.

'Spanish Flu', which rapidly became an epidemic since people had been weakened by deprivation and 'stress' during the war, and therefore had little resistance to the virus, killed more than had died during the conflict. It soon became apparent that many war jobs were about to disappear and that the ranks of the unemployed would swell immeasurably. In this regard on the January 15, 1919, Lord Milner, 66 the Colonial Secretary, requested the views of Lord Methuen, 67 the Governor of Malta, regarding the possibility of relief over the population of Malta due to unemployment likely to occur from the discharge of Admiralty and other workers by any comprehensive and properly considered scheme of emigration to suitable places.

Governor Methuen's Declaration

On Friday, January 24, the Daily Malta Chronicle, 68 reported that the previous Tuesday a talk had been given at the Aula Magna by Sir Archibald Garrod regarding the subject of islands. This was merely a prelude to a concluding address given by Lord Methuen which was published in full in that newspaper, regarding the urgent need for the Maltese to consider emigration as the only remedy for the unemployment that was about to escalate with the shedding of surplus manpower at the dry-docks and the demobilisation of persons employed with the services. He estimated that there would be some 16,000 more unemployed men within a short period of time.

The Governor stated that during his visit to Palestine the previous November, he had spoken to the Governor there, regarding the expediency of starting Maltese Colonies in that country. Colonel Gabriel, Financial Adviser to the Governor of Palestine, spoke on exactly the same subject to the Governor, as subsequently did Father Lamb, Carmelite Friar, who was on his way to Haifa in order to put the Carmelite Monastery there into proper repair, as it had been considerably damaged during the war. Father Lamb pointed out the advantages that would ensue from establishing a colony of Maltese at Haifa. He said that the climatic conditions were the same as in Malta; that the language being Arabic would not present the same difficulties as it would elsewhere; that the system of cultivation was practically the same; and that the Maltese would be well received in that town. He thought that he would be able to

65 Ganado, 201.
66 Alfred, Lord Milner (1854-1925), British statesman, administrator and reformer, who formulated foreign and domestic policy and who was particularly influential during the First World War. He was the chief author of the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and became Colonial Secretary in December 1918.
67 Paul, Lord Methuen (1840-1932), British military commander, who had a long and distinguished career in the army - chiefly in South Africa - and was Governor of Malta between 1915 and 1919.
68 NAM, CSGB6.23 January 15, 1919.
69 DMC. January 24, 1919, 7.
70 Sir Archibald Garrod (1857-1936) was an English doctor who served as a medical consultant to the army primarily in Malta, before going on to become a Professor of Medicine at Oxford University.
71 DMC, January 24, 1919, 7.
that an emigration since the Carmelites could and British plans for the development of agriculture in the country. The presence of the Carmelite Fathers, headed by Fr Charles Lamb, although a less enthusiastic correspondent suggested that it would be best at first to start only in a small way, and then if the scheme turned out satisfactory, they could add to the number later on. Colonel Gabriel said that they intended to have a breakwater there, which would cost over two million pounds, and that Haifa would be the great seaport of the future on that seacoast. This apparently fortuitous coincidence prompted the governor to make this speech in which he urged ‘press and pulpit’ to advertise this scheme. Lord Methuen’s term as Governor of Malta ended in the spring of 1919, and in his farewell speech to the Parish priests of the island given on Candlemas Day, he made a stirring appeal to them to encourage emigration to Palestine.

At the end of January 1919 the Governor told Lord Milner that an emigration committee had been set up with the task of setting up an Emigration Bureau which, among other things, aimed to prepare prospective emigrants by teaching them colloquial English. In the meantime, he was waiting for a favourable reply from the [British] Authorities in Palestine.

On the February 3, the Governor wrote privately to Brigadier-General Storrs informing him about the setting up of a Committee with Mr Casolani as secretary, who was ready to go to Haifa to assess the situation first hand. The plan was to ‘start small’ and send between 20 and 30 Maltese only.

General Allenby replied to Lord Methuen on February 25, explaining that the proposal was likely to cause considerable agitation since the future of Palestine had not yet been decided at the Peace Conference. Furthermore, only urgent building works were being undertaken by the administration.

Maltese reaction to the announcement

The Governor’s speech instigated a number of written requests for employment in Palestine from a number of notable professionals including the editor of the Malta Herald, Dr George Borg MBE, for public employment within the proposed administration of the British Mandate in Palestine.

The reaction in the local press was mixed. Letters in the Daily Malta Chronicle tended to be positive and enthusiastic since it was considered that Palestine was near enough to enable cheap transportation of entire families there, rather than just single men; there was apparently the prospect of much work on the Haifa breakwater and British plans for the development of agriculture in the country. The project was deemed also suitable for skilled Maltese workmen and husbandmen by a Maltese priest living in Palestine who had made the journey from Haifa to Jerusalem. The presence of the Carmelite Fathers, headed by Fr Charles Lamb, near Haifa was also considered to be a positive one, since the Carmelites could act as a hub for the Maltese and assist the emigrants until they were well and truly settled in the country, although a less enthusiastic correspondent suggested that the country was not yet sufficiently civilised. However, a wary note was sounded by a correspondent who had lived in Palestine country and was concerned about the intended governance of the country following the Versailles conference.

The reaction of the Maltese press was less than enthusiastic. The Church’s Il-Habib made no firm commitment either way and merely reported the governor’s speech while strongly urging its readers to carefully consider the proposal before reaching a decision. It noted the agreement between Lord Methuen, Cardinal Bourne, Fr Lamb and Admiral Calthorpe and cautiously advised would-be emigrants to read between the lines. Il-Himar, on the other hand, warned about the dangers of emigration, citing the unsuccessful emigration schemes to Brazil and Cyprus. It urged would-be emigrants to ascertain themselves about the details of the proposed conditions of work before committing themselves to a possibly unfavourable scheme which it called ‘contracted slavery’.

Foreign Newspapers’ reaction to the announcement

The Zionist Journal Palestine, issued on February 1, 1919, was headed by an article entitled Palestine and the Colonial Office, in which Lord Methuen’s announcement
was described as one that would fill every friend of a Jewish Palestine with amazement and perplexity. While sympathising with the plight of the Maltese, the journal emphatically stated that the future of the Maltese is not and cannot be in Palestine, since the Versailles Peace Conference had not been concluded and since Palestine was not an empty piece of land without a past or rightful claimants. The Colonial Office was blamed for the faux pas, which was against decisions taken by the War Cabinet and which had to be corrected immediately. The article concluded by suggesting that Palestine should be taken care of by the Foreign Office, rather than the Colonial Office.

This magazine, which was published in Jerusalem, was read by the British Governor of Jerusalem, General Allenby, who judged that in view of commitments made by the British Government towards the setting up of a Jewish state in Palestine the proposed scheme was very undesirable at present since it could not fail to rouse hostile Jewish feeling. General Clayton was instructed to write to Lord Methuen on his behalf, to inform him about the matter and the strongly worded article in condemnation of the project published in the Zionist Journal. Furthermore, the remarks made by Lieutenant-Colonel Gabriel regarding future developments at Haifa were entirely unauthorized since only works of immediate and urgent necessity were to be undertaken.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Chronicle published an article expressing surprise at the report of Lord Methuen's speech which had just appeared in full in the Manchester Guardian as part of a long letter written by Lord Sheffield in support of the Maltese Settlement project, since after all the British Government's Declaration had not precluded non-Jewish immigration. The Jewish Chronicle continued by stating that this suggestion could not have originated from Lord Milner in that it contradicted the spirit of the Balfour Declaration and hoped that Lord Milner will set his face resolutely against the whole plan.

A week later an article appeared in the form of an impassioned plea expressing disbelief in the proposal, calling for the whole Jewish nation to rise up with one voice and sign a petition for the implementation of the Balfour Declaration and wishing that any hand that withdrew it would wither. Moreover, the contents of Lord Sheffield's letter were refuted and declared to be at variance with the Government's true intent.

This article was followed by a letter from Mr Israel Zangwill who pointed out that there may have been collusion between the Government of Malta and the Governor of Palestine to encourage emigration which would strengthen the element which already hampers the rise of a Jewish state and concluding with a call for a world-wide protest. Mr Zangwill subsequently wrote another letter stating that should a Trustee Power apply to Palestine methods used in Egypt and India, the immigration and establishment of Jews in Palestine will not secure the necessary impulse, particularly in view of the project to transport Maltese to the Land of Israel.

A third article appeared at the end of February pointing the finger at a 'Catholic ecclesiastic residing in Palestine' while seeking to exonerate Lord Methuen, since Cardinal Bourne, who had recently been in Palestine, enthusiastically supported the Maltese emigration and suggesting that an attempt was afoot to people the country with a considerable Catholic element. This was followed by the copy of a letter printed in the Daily Malta Chronicle, from Lord Calthorpe to Lord Methuen quoting Cardinal Bourne as being enthusiastic about the project, saying that a well organised scheme of emigration to the Holy Land would have every chance of

92 Ibid.
93 NAE F.O. 608/96/7 Malta: Emigration to Palestine: letter No. 32520/M.E./44 of 3 March from Foreign Office to Colonial Office.
94 JC, January 31, 1919, 4-5.
95 JC, February 7, 1919, 16.
becoming a great success and would prove of great benefit both to Malta and to Palestine.

This was followed by a letter from Corporal A. Benscher who wrote as follows:100

"THE JEWISH CHRONICLE
February 28, 1919
MALTESE EMIGRATION TO PALESTINE.
From Corpl. A. M. BENSCHER.
[TO THE EDITOR.]
SIR,—I read with feelings of consternation and dismay in your issue of the 7th inst. the astounding suggestion put forward re the formation of a Maltese colony in Palestine.

Having during the war been stationed for two years in Malta, and having, by reason of my duties, been brought into close daily contact with the natives, especially those of the lower classes, I am able to say emphatically that the transplanting of large numbers to Palestine would be nothing short of disastrous, especially from a Jewish point of view.

The large majority of those who would be likely to form the Colony are incorubly lazy, born thieves, and entirely lacking in even elementary education, being unable to read or write. As regards the latter, they show not the slightest desire to make an improvement, all attempts at introducing compulsory education having consistently failed. Furthermore, from every point of view, they are hundreds of years behind the times, and show no sympathy with any proposals for the introduction of up-to-date methods.

In view of these facts, it behoves all Jews, who hope to see Palestine the centre of Jewish culture, learning, and ideals, to make the strongest possible protest against this most reactionary proposal, as it is utterly inconceivable that they could tolerate in their midst a people so low and debased and so devoid of all those characteristics which have made Jews famous throughout the world.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that the Maltese are notoriously intolerant as regards religions matters.

February 17th,*

Maltese reaction to Benscher's letter
The reaction to Corporal Benscher's letter in the Maltese press was slow in appearing but the first salvo appeared in il-Hmar towards the middle of April in the form of a brief letter denouncing the insults and promising a suitable verbal and physical reply should the writer meet him.101

100 JC, February 28, 1919, 19, letter dated February 17, 1919.
101 "Inglis-Usli" in il-Hmar, April 16, 1919, 2.

The response was taken up by L-Unjuni Maltija in three letters which appeared during May 1919. The first102 reproved Corporal Benschier's ingratitude and assured him that the Maltese had no intention of settling in Palestine, since it was to the United States that they wished to emigrate, and that he was perfectly welcome to go there himself if he wished. A translation of the letter into Maltese was given and this was followed by a strong political statement exclaiming that the Maltese nation, although small, would soon be autonomous.103

The second letter104 was a poem dedicated to the 'famous' Corporal Benscher, which was a studied personal attack on him and his paternity,105 which compared the civilisation of the Maltese throughout history with the savagery of his ancestors and noted the dishonest behaviour of his fellow soldiers during the war.106

The last letter107 took the form of an article outlining the virtues of the Maltese throughout history, their bravery, intelligence and diligence, as a response to the 'vile' and 'sordid' Corporal Benscher.

The tone of the three letters shows an aversion and intolerance to Jews, thereby confirming at least one of Corporal Benscher's comments on the Maltese. However, these letters can also be considered as a vehicle wherein the writers used this standpoint as a mask to permit the airing of their hostile political views against the Colonial Government at a time when economic hardship became a channel for fomenting political unrest.

The British Authorities' reaction
Meanwhile the Secretary of the Zionist Organisation had written to the Foreign Office108 noting that the project, as described in the article of the Daily Malta Chronicle, was at variance with the Balfour Declaration and that '... the Zionist Organisation feels itself bound to assume that either the proposal has been made without the concurrence of the Foreign Office and the full approval of the British Government or, if not, it is of quite a different character than that reported'.

Lord Curzon replied stating that Declaration did not absolutely close the door to immigration into Palestine to persons not of Jewish race. However, there were private misgivings within the Foreign Office about the unfortunate timing of

102 'Hobbuhom Ingliji' in L'Unjuni Maltija, May 3, 1919, 2.
103 The 7 plagno (June, 1913) riots were another step towards autonomous self-government in 1921.
104 'Xkaha?' in L'Unjuni Maltija, May 17, 1919, 2-3. Letter signed by 'Mannarrino' - alluding to Don Gaetano Mannarino who led the rising of the priests in 1775 in an attempt to reduce the price of grain: a significant consideration in 1919.
105 In the poem, he is repeatedly asked if he knows who his father really is, alluding to his having been born one month after his parents' marriage.
106 Allusions to drunkenness and theft.
107 'Asil Maltin' in L'Unjuni Maltija, May 24, 1919, 5-6, letter signed by Giuseppin Farrugia.
108 NAE F.O. 608/96/7 (Maltese settlement in Palestine), letter dated February 5, 1919.
the proposal, which was made before the conclusion of the Peace Conference. General Allenby felt that the speech had been made at an inopportune time and that furthermore the remarks made by Colonel Gabriel regarding the proposed works at Haifa were entirely unauthorised. Indeed some officials in the Foreign Office felt that permitting mass emigration of Maltese to Palestine would seem to conflict with the British Government's promise to the Zionists. The raising of the question of Maltese immigration before the end of the peace conference, the pre-empting of what was precisely meant by facilitating a decision on the creation of a National Home for the Jews and the uncertainty that Great Britain would be able to dispose of Palestine as it liked would certainly arouse the suspicions of the Jewish world.

Not surprisingly, early in March Lord Methuen and Lord Milner received a Confidential Telegram from Earl Curzon, Secretary of State stating that the colonization of Palestine by Maltese could not be considered at present owing to political reasons. Subsequent correspondence from Lord Milner made it perfectly clear that it was inadvisable to pursue the matter any further. Lord Methuen was to be informed accordingly.

Lord Methuen explained that no settlement on an extensive scale had been contemplated and the only concrete proposal made to him came from the monks of Mount Carmel for a limited number of Maltese husbandmen for lands belonging to their convent, following the receipt of a letter by Mr Casolani from the Rev. Francis Lamb, in which a much rosier picture was painted. The Foreign Office then declared that the 'scare about Maltese labour for Palestine was due to a misunderstanding' and that nothing more need be said.

The Zionist Organisation wrote to the Foreign Office alleging that Methuen had acted on instructions received from the Colonial Office and that in a subsequent letter the organisation stated that the British Government could not be furthering the establishment of a National Home for the Jews while at the same time promoting non-Jewish immigration on an extensive scale. A reply was sent stating that permanent colonisation of Palestine by the Maltese was at no time under consideration. The suggestion had been made for temporary employment of Maltese in Palestine in a semi-military capacity.

Fig. 12. Corporal Benscher’s War Medal Card

Fig. 13. Aubrey Benscher’s Tombstone in Bushy Cemetery

109 Ibid., minute signed by Forbes Adams dated February 26, 1919.
110 Ibid., correspondence between General Allenby and Lord Methuen / Foreign Office dated February 27, 1919.
111 Ibid., Minute February 27, 1919.
112 George, Marquess Curzon of Kedleston (1859-1925) British statesman, who was Viceroy of India and a member of the War Cabinet during the First World War, before becoming Foreign Secretary towards the end of 1919.
113 NAM S. of S. 51/1919, March 10, 1919.
114 NA F.O. 608/96/7 (Maltese settlement in Palestine) - Colonial Office to Foreign Office March 3, 1919.
115 Ibid., Milner to Methuen March 17, 1919.
116 Ibid., Methuen to Colonial Office, February 20, 1919.
117 Ibid., Lamb to Casolani, February 6, 1919.
118 Ibid., Foreign Office to Colonial Office, April 2, 1919.
119 Ibid., Zionist Organisation to Foreign Office, April 25, 1919.
120 Ibid., Foreign Office to Zionist Organisation to Foreign Office, May 17, 1919.
So ended the scheme for the proposed settlement of Maltese in Palestine even before it was fully formulated.

The international background to the proposed Maltese Settlement in Palestine

The comment made in Il-Habib regarding the unity of purpose between the key players in this proposal reflects the opinion of the Jewish World, which reported Cardinal Bourne’s favourable views on the settlement of Maltese in Palestine. The denial, which appeared in the Tablet regarding the Holy See’s support for a Jewish state and the fact that the cardinal’s 1919 Lenten Pastoral was signed as ‘Given in Jerusalem’ all spell trouble for Zionism.121

The Italian risorgimento was seen as a threat by the papacy and the revolutions of 1848 forced Pope Pius IX to take refuge at the port of Gaeta. He had already accepted the idea of taking refuge in Malta, which had been suggested to him by Sir William Parker, Admiral of the British Mediterranean fleet. However, the kingdom of the Two Sicilies was against the proposal, which came to nothing. Again, on the eve of the capture of Rome in 1870, the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone offered Pope Pius IX temporary refuge in Malta, but the Pope demurred, preferring to remain in the Vatican.122 The choice of Malta was based, in part, on the religious fervour of the Maltese and its relative proximity to the Italian mainland.123

Relations between the papacy and the Kingdom of Italy did not improve. The Pope considered himself a virtual ‘prisoner’ in the Vatican and events such as the commemoration of the capture of Porta Pia in 1910 were moments of high tension between the anticlericalism of Ernesto Nathan,124 the mayor of Rome, and the Holy See. The secret treaty of London, signed between Italy and the Allies in 1915 included the following text as its penultimate article: ‘France, Great Britain and Russia will support Italy’s opposition to any proposal to introduce a representative of the Holy See in all the negotiation for peace and the resolution of questions raised by the present war’125 [author’s translation] Despite strenuous diplomatic efforts by the Holy See to ensure the presence of a high ranking catholic prelate, if not a direct representative, the equally dogged efforts made by Italy proved triumphant at the Versailles conference.126

The increasing tendencies towards laicisation which were definitely anti-Church and even anti-religion, were countered by a series of Eucharistic Congresses which were organised from the late nineteenth century.

Of special importance was the Eighth Eucharistic Congress, held in Jerusalem between May 14 and 21, 1893.127 Eastern rite Catholics participated as well as Catholics of the Armenian rite.128 It was the first time an official papal delegate took part in the person of the Cardinal Archbishop of Rheims and was also the president of this Congress.129 This Congress brought about considerable rapprochement between eastern and western Catholics and can be considered to be a prelude to ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue.130 It was also, incidentally, an occasion for high-ranking western prelates to visit the Holy Land.131

It is not surprising that the Holy See considered the increasing anticlericalism in Italy and the influence of freemasonry132 as potentially dangerous to it, and a top-secret project to transport Pope Benedict XV by air to Malta in case of danger was devised.133 However this was not the only place of refuge that had been considered since in 1916 rumours of a promise made by the Kaiser to establish a papal state in Palestine were reported in the Italian press.134 It would seem that at the time, the Cardinal Secretary of State cherished the idea of creating a Vatican state in the Holy Land,135 possibly as a substitute for the loss of the Papal States in Italy.136 The publication of the ‘secret’ treaty of London by the Soviets in 1917 may have provided still further impetus for this idea. The discussions on the Holy Land during the Versailles conference were long and tortuous, with each power trying to maximise its influence over the complex region, in which the Holy Places were a particularly delicate issue.137

During 1919 and 1920 three cardinals, Francis Cardinal Bourne of England, Filippo Cardinal Giustini of Italy and Louis Cardinal Dubois of France, visited
Palestine in turn, each being used to serve the interests of his home country but also those of the pope. During his visit, which was widely reported in the British press, Cardinal Bourne became convinced that the Zionists and the Protestants posed the most serious threat to the Catholics. In both cases the factor which was deemed to threaten the Vatican's interests was the Balfour Declaration which was considered to mean that Palestine would in effect be given to the Zionists.

Cardinal Bourne's visit served to convince the Pope that a British Mandate would safeguard existing rights to the Holy Places. However, the opinion voiced by all three cardinals was that the Zionists posed the greatest threat to the Catholic Church's interests. Cardinal Bourne wrote to the prime minister opposing the domination of Palestine by Zionists and the publication of a letter by the bishop of London on Zionism in the Morning Post opposing the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine at that time illustrated his opinion. Cardinal Bourne's visit to Palestine was part of the Holy See's struggle to safeguard Catholic interests with the British authorities.

The proposed Maltese settlement in Palestine would also have suited the interests of the British Government, which was anxious to solve the problem of rising unemployment in Malta so as to avoid a repetition of the problems which were fast emerging in Egypt and India. It would have increased the number of potentially pro-British persons resident in the Holy Land and provided a pool of potential employees that would be needed in the running of the British Mandate in Palestine.

Above all, the proposed Maltese settlement in Palestine would have admirably suited Catholic interests in the Holy Land, since the importation of a cohort of staunch Catholics, known for their unwavering support of the church, its dogma and the Holy Father, would have been invaluable, particularly if it were intended as a prelude to the eventual transfer of the Holy Father to the Holy Land.

Evidence of Maltese Catholic religious fervour had been made abundantly clear during the Eucharistic Congress held in Malta in 1913.

Conclusion

It would seem that regardless of the failure of the proposal to settle Maltese in Palestine, the projected crisis envisaged by Lord Methuen was averted through the stalwart endeavours of the Emigration Committee, which he had set up early in 1919. Although some 15,600 workers had been made redundant at the end of the War, between the end of 1918 and 1920 nearly 9000 Maltese emigrants left Malta, mostly to British Dominions.

The Holy See's aspirations for territorial expansion in the Holy Land were unsuccessful, although the Franciscans continue their work in the 'Custody of the Holy Land' looking after the numerous pilgrims who visit the Holy Sites each year.

The protagonist of this tale, Corporal Aubrey Benscher, returned home to London after his service in the Great War for which he was awarded the British War medal and the First World War Victory medal. He rejoined the family business and continued his association with the Brondesbury synagogue. He married Elsie Mildred Nickels in the spring of 1933 and the couple lived in London until the beginning of the Second World War, when they moved to Bushy (Hertfordshire). He died on March 5, 1949, aged 64, and lies buried in the cemetery in Bushy.

138 Pollard, 148.
139 Minerbi, 28.
140 Ibid., Francis Bourne (1861–1935) was appointed archbishop of Westminster in 1903 and became a cardinal in 1911. Although conservative, he was exceedingly influential and proved to be highly patriotic during World War I. He took part in the Eucharistic Congress held in Malta in 1913 and would thus have had the possibility to gauge the strength of Maltese religious fervour.
141 La Civiltà Cattolica, March 1913, quoted in Minerbi, 29.
142 NAE FO 608/118/10 - Zionism: Vatican Desiderata.
143 Minerbi, 29.
144 NAE FO 608/118/10 - Zionism: Vatican Desiderata.
145 The Morning Post, October 8, 1919: this paper's markedly anti-Zionist tone reached its climax in 1920 with the publication of articles based on the notorious Protocols of the Elder of Zion, which were subsequently published as The Cause of World Unrest.
146 NAE FO 608/118/10 - Zionism: Vatican Desiderata.
147 At this time, the situation in Egypt was fast deteriorating owing to the political demands of the Wafd Party led by Saad Zaghloul. These reached a climax in early March 1919.
148 Indian calls for a measure of self-government were stifled by legislation and this resulted in national wide protests instigated by Gandhi, which led to the massacre at Amritsar in April 1919.
149 This tactic was used by the French, who welcomed 'neutral' Maltese immigrants to Tunisia to counterbalance the numbers of Italian immigrants.
150 Price, 190.
151 Online UK Marriage registers, Bromley district, vol. 2a, 1654, June 1933.
152 The last entry for Aubrey Benscher in the London Telephone directory is in 1940.
153 Date written on his tombstone. Aubrey was survived by his widow Elsie, who passed away in 1997.
Appendix I

Article published in the Zionist Journal Palestine

PALESTINE.
The ORGAN of the BRITISH PALESTINE COMMITTEE.

The British Palestine Committee seeks to reset the ancient glories of the Jewish Nation in the freedom of a new British Dominion in Palestine.

"If he [Lord Beaconsfield] had freed the Holy Land, and restored the Jews, as he might have done, instead of pottering about with Roumelia and Afghanistan, he would have died Dictator" - "The Spectator."

Palestine and the Colonial Office.

Lord Methuen, the Governor of Malta, makes an announcement which will fill every friend of a Jewish Palestine with amazement and perplexity. He says that the Secretary of State for the Colonies has asked him to interest himself in the question of Maltese emigration, and has suggested the starting of colonies in Palestine and Mesopotamia. Lord Methuen himself insists that Palestine is the right field for Maltese emigration, and Colonel Gabriel, the financial adviser to the Governor of Palestine, announced that it is intended to build a breakwater at Haifa, costing over two million pounds, for which Maltese labour could be employed.

We have every sympathy with the people of Malta, and, if we condemn this particular scheme for their benefit, it is not from any hostility to them. Just as we are quite convinced that the future of the Maltese is not and cannot be in Palestine, so we are quite convinced that the surplus population of Malta can and will find a more congenial home elsewhere.

The first thing that will strike the observant reader of Lord Methuen's speech is that the Colonial Office, Lord Methuen and Colonel Gabriel are all disposing of Palestine as though its fate had already been decided. They are making plans for great harbour works at Haifa, and they are projecting Maltese colonies, just as though there were no such thing as a Peace Conference. The next thing to be [p.203] observed is that the Colonial Office and Lord Methuen are not merely disposing of Palestine, but are disposing of it just as though it were a British Crown Colony, a piece of empty land without a past, without rightful claimants, to which the Colonial Office may despatch any stray elements of population from anywhere under its authority. Palestine, in their eyes, might just be East Africa or Mesopotamia, and if, to-day, they plan to send Maltese there, to-morrow they might fill up Palestine with Chinese or Hindoos.

The Colonial Office does not seem yet to have heard that the Jewish people, a people fourteen millions strong, are determined to make that ancient home of Palestine once more into a Jewish land that the British Government has pledged itself to that policy and is submitting that policy to the Peace Conference; that Great Britain, because of that policy, has won the gratitude and the esteem of the whole Jewish people; and that this policy has been approved by most of the great Powers. In blind ignorance of all these very important and not unfamiliar facts, the Colonial Office works out a policy which is a direct negation of that policy of a Jewish Palestine with which the War Cabinet is identified. Those who do not know English conditions might be pardoned if they drew the conclusion that the British Government was playing a double game; that in public it was promising one thing and in private practising another.

The true explanation, of course, is a very different one. Throughout the war there has been a strong tendency for English Ministers to work in water-tight compartments, and to take decisions without knowledge of what their colleagues were doing and without subordination to a general scheme. We assume that is the kind of blunder into which Mr. Walter Long fell when he was at the Colonial Office, but the blunder must be corrected without fail. For if this scheme stands on record to make Palestine a Maltese colony then neither the Jewish people nor the Peace Conference can be expected to have or will have any faith in British pledges. British honour is at stake in this matter, and, let us add, British interests. From the British Imperial point of view it is a small matter whether the Maltese surplus population disperses to Italy, Tunis, or Algiers, rather than to Palestine: but that there should be a Jewish Palestine riveting the gratitude to Great Britain of fourteen million Jews is a matter of very considerable Imperial importance. If Mr. Walter Long did not understand this, his successor, Lord Milner, may be counted upon to do so. Lord Milner has always been one of the best friends in the Government of a Jewish Palestine.

[p.203] He is a man of understanding and a wide intellectual grasp. He knows that this question of a Jewish Palestine is not one of the minor but one of the greater issues of the peace settlement. We shall expect an early pronouncement from him that the misconceived vision of a Maltese Palestine has vanished.

Some persons may be inclined to say that this Maltese project is, after all, only a very small thing. It should be pointed out, however, that precisely in these first years after the war the Jewish demand for land in Palestine and for work in Palestine will be at its most intense. For five years there has been no emigration
from Eastern Europe. The regions of Eastern Europe in which the Jews dwell have been desolated and laid waste, the Jewish misery is beyond all description. The flood of emigration is only awaiting the coming of peace to launch forth like a great reservoir bursting its dam. Yet just at this moment the American Congress is considering a Bill to prohibit all emigration for four years and similar legislation is being proposed in other European countries. Inevitably, Jewish emigration will turn towards Palestine. Of course, Palestine can harbour only a fraction in its early years of renaissance, but even this fraction will be excluded if Maltese and other aliens to Palestine are to be drafted in to take the land and execute the public works. There is again the second consideration upon which we touched before—that once the Colonial Office makes a precedent with Maltese, there is nothing to stop it going on to Chinese and Hindoos or any other of the multifarious races of the globe. The root of this Maltese episode shows is utterly unfitted for the task. It has not the requisite mentality. Palestine to it is no more than East Africa, and the Jewish people less than the Maltese unemployed. The Colonial Office has neither the imagination nor the knowledge to grasp the romance or the greatness of the re-making of a Jewish Palestine. The Foreign Office is more apt for the undertaking. It has been engaged with the problem during the years of war; it is engaged with it at the Peace Conference. The future of the Jewish Palestine is not to be a Crown Colony, but to be something new in the history of administration—a trusteeship superintended by a League of Nations. A Jewish Palestine belongs to the sphere of international relations, not to that of colonial dominion. It must, therefore, be under the authority of the Foreign Office, not of the Colonial Office.

Appendix II
Letters published in the Maltese Press
1. Il-Hmar: 22 ta Frarl1919
Il Maltin Ghal Barra!!

Il Gvernatur mar, u giemie milli milli, Is-sigiar tat tamar u l'gholi taħhom, daurulu rasul Ghalilex, ghamel panigircu f'lk Pakistan, l'dic il ġurnata li taud il laurea ta Avucat ta Malta, ghal chemm l'ìngiżjew jifhem uisk izjed. Il kaghad li seįjer icollna, wara li jįgju ta salonica u iceļuħu il barra, uara li isserveu bihom, tad-Dockyard,
3. L'Unioni Maltija Malta, is-Sibt 3 ta Mejju 1919
Hobbuhom l'Inglis

Uara li tant ghamilna mal feriti tal guerra, nara li ahna ikkainta fosta b'afkar patriotismsu tant mardijet, uara li ahna sofreina bil gholi tal hijja sabiex Malta tca sptar tal Mediterran ghall għoti sejgħatt u għal għustiżia, uiehed lings li chien fosta għoli xi xini, il Capural Benschker, lihdi, mar chiteb hafna għideb fuk il Maltin, għax baza li il maltin seirin jemgurau lein il Palestina, menti dana ma jafx li il maltin m'hux hemm iridu immorru, izda l'America, għax hemm icunu jistgħu igheixu bhal veri Cristiani u m'hux bhal Gharab. Jokghod bi quietu, il Capural Benschker għax il maltin m'humiexi seirin il Palestina, hemmec jista imur hua u jokghod igaudi ftit il giurati u jahseb chemm huma tassequ nies taiba il maltin li taktghu fi ħdanom, għallavolja lihdi, menti hua kalom li huma intollerant. Iva mieta tant nies għal għustiżia u l-libertà, meti seirin nisrreptazju il proxxmu taghna, għallavolja għar?

Haun taħt seirin ingibu tradotta mil l'inglis il famusa idea tal Capural benschher:-

«Fli stess hin suldat zaghzuh, il Capural A. M. Benscher, chiteb lil Jewish Chronicle u kal li hua b'afkar costernazioni u ghageb sama li chien humm suggeriment biex tittwakkaf Colonia Maltija fil Palestina. Compla kal uccoli lli għal sentejn, imhabbas fis-servizz militari f'Malta, chellu hafna kontatt man-nattivi (natives) u hua tal hsieb li il maggioranza ta dauc li seirin aktarx jiffurmu il Colonia huma nies għazzenin u mingħajr deikan minn tuielidom hallelin u lura hafna f'l'educaziżjoni anche elementary, għax la jafu jakra u ankas jictbxbu. Issa għal l'ahhar hada huma (il maltin) ma juru l'ebda sinjal ta' xeuka sabiex javanzau, cull attantat sabiex isir it-tagħlim ta balfor chien collu għal xein. Iżed minn qalqune mod il maltin huma mit sena lura ma jistgħu biex jistgħu chemm jistgħu biex jistgħu jiex per indik xin jistgħu. Dana xzaqana?

Li chiecu daun il complimenti sbieh lil Maltin hargiu minn halk ta xi Torc jew Germanis ma cònnexi nadda biċbira, imma biex johorgu minn halk ta uiehed li jćcambatta għal għustiżia u għal-libertà tal popli zghar hia haga ta Orrur, hagha li ma tittuemonix. Forși dan il famus crittcu chien uiehed minn dauc l'ixxurtiżi li ra il complimenti minn dauc is-sinjuri u sinjuri li iridu jaghmulha tal heluż, li iridu jaghmulha bhal dauc li il-lum bosta minnhom kieghdin imak dredhom. Atti iċ-ċicculata u it-tejet heli! X'ringrażtiamenti daun eh! L'euuel ma tul il guerra taxxli fuk taxxi biex niftakru u issa complimenti l'zied sbieh fuk il caracteru taghna. Dana għaliex? Forși għax ma ahhnie xi bhal Boeri, bhal egiziani jew bhal l'Indiani? Il famus Capural Benschker tafu x'messu kal, li il Poplu Malti hu l'zied poplu lura, għax sal jgjarata tallum ghadu katt ma approva sejgħu, seriament u surjet in-nies biex jehu l'Autonomia, imma b'afkar lealtà lkgħad bil pacezzi collabor jura flusu amministrati Pil Ministru Inglis. Allura chien icollu ragun, imma issa il Poplu malti behsieb ottieni dac li jisthokklu - l'autonomia - biex ma igheidulux izied native u li ghadu lura.

4. L'Unioni Maltija Malta, is-Sibt 17 ta Mejju 1919
X'Aħna?

(Lil famus scrittur Inglis Lhudi Sor A. M. Benschker - Capural.)
Gheidli Benschker, f'gieh dic ommoc
- Min hi ommoc sgu lli taf!
- Mohhoc ghadu tari hafna
Jeu f'di l'guerra 'ntilef, xraf?
Taf xejn meta il Maltin f'Ruma
Chellom professori cbar,
Intom kontu mir-ragbad tibżghu.
Tistagbeu rmuflu f'xli għar?
Taf xejn meta Malt f'Ruma
Chella ulleda jesaminau
Intom kontu ghadom gherienu
Tistadu ghal baccalajau?
Taf li meta kontu Brini
Ahna chellna tant ghorriż?
Jeu bit-tiri mohhoc hfeeff!!
Napuliun il cib imsemmi
Lilna kal l'inthom Selvaggi
Dan m'hilux, meta fid-dinja
Ta I'gherf colla xterdu 'r-raggi!
Taf xejn Benschker, Inglis Lhudi,
L'ahna nghadru lli nniemed?
Tirdix piacirtaghmel t'ghidilna
Feinu gherfcom, jà mischin?!
Inti gharef u gharef bosta
Sgu lli gherfex ma imut katt,
Fein tuelidd? Min HU missierec?
Tighu ibghatli hei ritratt!
U la darba s'haun uasaina
Nistaksic dakxein bil herra:
Katt rait Malti ibieh hueigiu
Biex jixrohom tazza biirra?!
Katt rait Malti hecca vili
Bhal bebbux bla xein misthija
Fil ghajnejn? Approva uiehed
Jen inglese rait fuk mija!
Katt rait Malti jisrak gvieret,
Komos, klizez, flochijet?
U biex jixroh tazza biirra
C'jista ikaxxar lir-Rejet?!
Gheidi Bensch, f'gieh dic ommoc
Ghax missierec min katt HU?
Min hu minna issa l'actar
Illi 'mzeijen bil virtu?
Ma tarax illi ahijar
Hua minnec s...uf il HMAR.
Mannarinu