

IDA REYER PFEIFFER AND MALTA

By BERNARD C. WEBER

Of the relatively few German-speaking tourists who came to Malta in the first half of the nineteenth century and left accounts of their visits surely one of the most interesting was Ida Reyer Pfeiffer (1797-1858), a native of Vienna. As a girl she was fascinated by stories of far away places, but the opportunity for her own travel abroad was not realized until she had reached middle age. When she was twenty-three years old she married a lawyer and widower from Lemberg named Dr. Pfeiffer, and domestic cares delayed any immediate realization of her dreams to visit those remote places which held so much interest for her. Later in life, after her sons were educated and she was approaching the age of forty-five, she was finally able to set out without companions on a series of travels which had been long contemplated. To retain more accurately the recollections of her visits she carefully kept a diary, a simple and unadorned relation of facts.¹ She herself expressed the view that her diary should not be judged as a literary work, for it was, she declared, 'a simple narration, in which I have described every circumstance as it occurred ...'² She commenced her journey on March 22, 1842, taking a steamer from Vienna going down the Danube. Her first major objective was the Holy Land. From there she proceeded to Egypt, and from Egypt she came by ship to Malta. She remained in Malta from mid-September until October 4 when she embarked on the Sicilian steamer *Hercules* for a homeward journey. She reached Vienna in December, 1842. Here are Mrs. Pfeiffer's comments on her visit to Malta.

September 14th.³

We did not come in sight of land until this evening, when the goal of our journey appeared.

MALTA

We cast anchor in the harbour of La Valette at seven o'clock. During

¹Her work first appeared under the title *Reise einer Wienerin in das heilige Land ...* 2 volumes (Vienna, 1843). The popularity of the work is evidenced by the fact that it went through several editions during the author's lifetime.

²This quotation is taken from an English translation of Ida Pfeiffer's work which appeared over a hundred years ago. See *Visit to the Holy Land, Egypt, and Italy*, translated from the German by H.W. Dulcken (London, Ingram, Cooke, and Co., 1852), p. 328. I have used this translation in the presentation of Mrs. Pfeiffer's comments about Malta.

³See pages 265-271 in Mr. Dulcken's translation of Ida Pfeiffer's account.

the whole of our journey from Alexandria the wind had been very unfavourable; the sea was frequently so agitated, that we could not walk across the deck without the assistance of a sailor.

The distance from Alexandria *via* Syra to Malta is 950 sea-miles. We took eight days to accomplish this distance, landing only at Syra. The heat was moderate enough, seldom reaching 28° or 29° Reaumur.

The appearance of Malta is picturesque; it contains no mountains, and consists entirely of hills and rocks.

The town of La Valette is surrounded by three lines of fortifications, winding like steps up the hill on which the town lies; the latter contains large fine houses, all built of stone.

September 15th.

This morning at eight o'clock we disembarked, and were marched off to keep quarantine in the magnificent castle of the Knights of St. John.

This building stands on a hill affording a view over the whole island in the direction of Civita Vecchia. We found here a number of clean rooms, and were immediately supplied with furniture, bedding, etc. by the establishment at a very reasonable charge. Our host at once despatched to every guest a bill of fare for breakfast and dinner, so that each one can choose what he wishes, without being cheated as to the prices. The keepers here are very obliging and attentive; they almost all know something of Italian, and execute any commission with which they are entrusted punctually and well. The building for the incarcerated ones is situated on an elevated plateau. It has two large wings, one on each side, one story high, containing apartments each with a separate entrance. Adjoining the courtyard is the inn, and not far from it the church; neither, however, may be visited by the new-comers. The requisite provisions are procured for them by a keeper, who takes them to the purchasers. The church is always kept closed. A broad handsome terrace, with a prospect over the sea, the town of La Valette, and the whole island, forms the foreground of the picture. This terrace and the ramparts behind the houses form very agreeable walks. The courtyard of our prison is very spacious, and we are allowed to walk about in it as far as a statue which stands in the middle. Until ten o'clock at night we enjoy our liberty; but when this hour arrives we are sent to our respective rooms and locked up. The apartments of the keepers are quite separate from ours.

The arrangements of the whole establishment are so good and comfortable that we almost forget that we are prisoners. What a contrast to the quarantine-house at Alexandria.

If a traveller receives a visitor, he is not separated from his guest by ditches and bars, but stands only two steps from him in the courtyard. The windows here are not grated; and though our clothes were hung on

horses to air, neither we nor our effects were smoked out. If it had not been for the delay it caused, I should really have spent the eighteen days of my detention here very pleasantly. But I wished to ascend Mount Etna, and was a fixture here until the 2nd of October.

October 1st.

The quarantine doctor examined us in a very superficial manner, and pronounced that we should be free tomorrow. Upon this a boisterous hilarity prevailed. The prisoners rejoiced at the prospect of speedy release, and shouted, sang, and danced in the courtyard. The keepers caught the infection, and all was mirth and good-humour until late in the night.

October 2nd.

At seven o'clock this morning we were released from thralldom. A scene similar to that at Alexandria then took place; every one rushed to seize upon the strangers. It is here necessary that the traveller should be as much upon his guard as in Egypt among the Arabs in the matter of boat-fares, portorage, etc. If a bargain is not struck beforehand, the people are most exorbitant in their demands.

A few days before our release, I had made an arrangement with an inn-keeper for board, lodging, and transport. Today he came to fetch me and my luggage, and we crossed the arm of the sea which divides Fort Manuel from the town of La Valette.

A flight of steps leads from the shore into the town, past the three rows of fortifications rising in tiers above each other. In each of these divisions we find streets and houses. The *town*, properly speaking, lies quite at the top; it is therefore necessary to mount and descend frequently, though not nearly so often as at Constantinople. The streets are broad and well paved, the homes spacious and finely built; the place of roofs is supplied by terraces, frequently parcelled out into little flower-beds, which present a very agreeable appearance.

My host gave me a tiny room, and meals on the same principle – coffee with milk morning and evening, and three dishes at dinner-time; but for all this I did not pay more than forty-five kreutzers, or about one shilling and six pence.

The first thing I did after taking up my quarters here was to hasten to a church to return thanks to the almighty for the protection he had so manifestly extended to me upon my long and dangerous journey. The first church which I entered at La Valette was dedicated to St. Augustine. I was particularly pleased with it, for since my departure from Vienna I had not seen one so neatly or so well built. Afterwards I visited the church of St. John, and was much struck with its splendour. This building is very

spacious, and the floor is completely covered with monumental slabs of marble, covering the graves of the knights. The ceiling is ornamented with beautiful frescoes, and the walls are sculptured from ceiling to floor with arabesques, leaves, and flowers, in sandstone.

All these ornaments are richly gilt, and present a peculiarly imposing appearance. The side-chapels contain numerous monuments, mostly of white marble, and one single one of black, in memory of celebrated Maltese knights. At the right-hand corner of the church is the so-called 'rose-coloured' chapel. It is hung round with a heavy silk stuff of a red colour, which diffuses a roseate halo over all the objects around. The altar is surrounded by a high massive railing. Two only of the paintings are well executed – namely, that over the high altar, and a piece representing Christ on the cross. The pillars round the altar are of marble; and at each side of the grand altar rise lofty canopies of red velvet fringed with gold, reaching almost to the vaulted cupola.

The uncomfortable custom of carrying chairs to and fro during church-time, which is so universal throughout Italy, begins already at Malta.

The predilection for the clerical profession seems to prevail here, as it does throughout Italy; I could almost say that every fifteenth person we meet either is a clergyman or intends to become one. Children of ten or twelve years already run about in the black gown and three-cornered hat.

The streets are handsome and cleanly kept, particularly the one which intersects the town; some of them are even watered. The counters of the dealer's shops contain the most exquisite wares; in fact, everywhere we find indications that we are once more on European ground.

When we see the Fachini here, with their dark worked caps or round straw hats, their short jackets and comfortable trousers, with jaunty red sashes round their waists, and their bold free glance, – when we contrast them with the wretched fellahs⁴ of Egypt, and consider that these men both belong to the same class in society, and that the fellahs even inhabit the more fruitful country, we begin to have our doubts of Mehemet Ali's⁵ *benignant* rule.

The governor's palace, a great square building, stands on a magnificent open space; next to it is the library; and opposite, the chief guard-house rears its splendid front, graced with pillars. The coffee-houses here are very large; they are kept comfortably and clean, particularly that on the great square, which is brilliantly illuminated every evening.

Women and girls appear dressed in black; they are usually accustomed to throw a wide cloak over their other garments, and wear a mantilla which conceals arms, chest, and head. The face is left uncovered, and I

⁴ Fellahs – peasants or labourers of Egypt.

⁵ Mehemet Ali (d. 1849) – pasha of Egypt.

saw some very lovely ones smiling forth from the black drapery. Rich people wear these upper garments of silk; the cloaks of the poorer classes are made of merino or cheap woollen stuffs.

It was Sunday when I entered La Valette for the first time. Every street and church was thronged with people, all of whom were neatly and decently dressed. I saw but few beggars, and those whom I met were less ragged than the generality of their class.

The military, the finest I had ever seen, consisted entirely of tall handsome men, mostly Scotchmen. Their uniforms were very tasteful. One regiment wore scarlet jackets and white linen trousers; another, black jackets and shoulder-knots, — in fact, the whole uniform is black, with the exception of the trousers, which are of white linen.

It seemed much more the fashion to drive than to ride here. The coaches are of a very peculiar kind, which I hardly think can be found elsewhere. They consist of a venerable old rattling double-seated box, swinging upon two immense wheels, and drawn by a single horse in shafts. The coachman generally runs beside his vehicle.

October 3rd.

To-day I drove in a carriage (for the first time since my departure from Vienna, a period of six months and a half) to Civita Vecchia, to view this ancient town of Malta, and particularly the celebrated church of St. Peter and St. Paul. On this occasion I traversed the whole length of the island, and had an opportunity of viewing the interior.

Malta consists of a number of little elevations, and is intersected in all directions by excellent roads. I also continually passed handsome villages, some of them so large that they looked like thriving little towns. The heights are frequently crowned by churches of considerable extent and beauty; although the whole island consists of rock and sandstone, vegetation is sufficiently luxurious. Fig, lemon, and orange trees grow everywhere, and plantations of the cotton-shrub are as common as potato-fields in my country. The stems of these shrubs are not higher than potato-plants, and are here cultivated exactly in the same way. I was told that they had been stunted this year by the excessive drought, but that in general they grew a foot higher.

The peasants were everywhere neatly dressed, and live in commodious well-built houses, universally constructed of stone, and furnished with terraces in lieu of roofs.

Civita Vecchia is a town of splendid houses and very elegant country-seats. Many inhabitants of La Valette spend the summer here in the highest portion of the island.

The church of St. Peter and St. Paul is a spacious building, with a simple interior. The floor is covered merely with stone slabs; the walls

are white-washed to the ceiling, but the upper portion is richly ornamented with arabesques. A beautiful picture hanging behind the high altar represents a storm at sea. The view from the hall of the convent is magnificent; we can overlook almost the entire island, and beyond our gaze loses itself in the boundless expanse of ocean.

Near the church stands a chapel, beneath which is St. Paul's grotto, divided into two parts: in the first of these divisions we find a splendid statue of St. Paul in white marble; the second was the dungeon of the apostle.

Not far from this chapel, at the extremity of the town, are the catacombs, which resemble those at Rome, Naples, and other towns.

During our drive back we made a little detour to see the gorgeous summer-palace and garden of the governor.

The whole excursion occupied about seven hours. During my residence in Malta the heat varied from 20° to 25° Reaumur in the sun.