

LIFE & WELLBEING HISTORY



Portrait of Fra Ignaz Balthasar Rinck von Baldenstein by Antoine Favray. Private collection, Malta



The residence of the German Grand Priors at Heitersheim bei Mattheus Merian (c 1650).



A later portrait of von Baldenstein.

# When Favray met Von Baldenstein



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The good news is that one of Antoine Favray's masterpieces is back in Malta, and that there is no bad news to go with it. Quite recently, one of the finer portraits by the finest portrait painter (with Caravaggio) Malta ever hosted, returned to its natural home, back where it was painted and where its narrative is more relevant to the history of the islands.

Antoine Favray (1706-1798) painted innumerable portraits, mostly of knights, Maltese aristocrats, prelates, professional notables and of anyone else who could afford his services and believed posterity would be cheated if left without their likeness. They vary in quality – his style and finesse evolved over his very long life – he died aged 92 – and he remained productive almost up to the end. Correct, if academic at first, virtuoso when he reached full maturity, and tired towards the latter end of his trajectory. Quite likely, when he could not cope with the pressures his clientele placed on him, he may have delegated part of his commissions to his bottega. That too may account for some occasional faltering in his products.

When the leading knight of Malta, Fra Ignaz Balthasar von Baldenstein, asked to have his portrait painted, Favray was at the height of his faculties. It must have been about 1776, after the artist's return from his long sojourn in Constantinople. Favray gave it all he had: passion, commitment, bravura and, one speculates, a personal sympathy for the sitter. The end result: a likeness of the highest quality which must have charmed Baldenstein and gratified the virtuoso in the artist. The portrait exudes the serenity born of breeding and inner peace. The best likenesses do not portray faces, but the spirit behind the face.

Though the sitter is wearing battle armour, it is the diplomat, rather than the warrior, that comes through. Why knights of Malta persisted in having their portrait painted in steel breastplates in the late 18th century, when armour had been obsolete for almost 200 years, is still

difficult to explain. In all other matters, they always struggled to be at the very forefront of fashions. Of course, Favray would have loved it – it gave him the opportunity to show his mastery at depicting the glint of burnished steel.

But perhaps it is another detail that authenticates the hand of the maestro: the old-gold braid cuff, lace and buttons on the sleeve. He painted the different textures in a way that makes the impossible look easy. He used his unmistakably French manner, solid but not hard-edged design, with almost pastel-like contours. Favray himself must have considered this portrait quite out of the ordinary. He very rarely signed his work, but this one he did, quite ostentatiously.

It is not always easy to follow the final phase of the history of the German Langue of the Order of Malta, and the activities and movements of its very last Grand Prior, Ignaz Balthasar Willibald Rinck von Baldenstein. This is mostly due to the ultimate fate of its archives. A part of the documents seem to have disappeared in France when the grand priory was suppressed in 1806; the remainder are spread over archives and collections in the Generallandesarchiv in Karlsruhe, in Freiburg, Vienna, and the Archivio di Stato in Modena. The collection of letters by the leading protagonists of the grand priory preserved in the Fonds Scøy-Ferrette in the city archive of Mulhouse in France, also offer valuable insights.

The noble family of Rinck (also Ringg) is documented since the late 14th century in the Swiss canton of Graubünden where they owned landed property in Thusis, Fürstenu, and near the Heizenberg mountain. In the early 15th century, the Rinck acquired the castle of Baldenstein whose name they added to the family name. In 1702, Joseph Wilhelm Rinck von Baldenstein (1672-1752) entered the services of the Prince Bishop of Basel and became councillor and Landvogt (governor) of Saint-Ursanne. Joseph Wilhelm was the founder of the so-called Basel branch of the Rinck von Baldensteins and father of the subject of this article.

Ignaz Balthasar Rinck von Baldenstein was born on August 4, 1721, in the family residence in Delsberg, offspring of Maria Claudia Antonia von Ramschwang. In 1734, Ignaz Balthasar was received into the Order of St John and sent to Malta to serve as page at the court of the Grand Masters. German historian Alfred Count of Kageneck, the Swiss Veronika Feller-Vest, and

others, say that Ignaz Balthasar served as page at the court of Grand Master Manoel Pinto de Fonseca; however, this cannot be correct as Pinto only rose to the highest position in the Order in 1741. Baldenstein was then already 20 years old, which would have disqualified him as page; by then he would have started his statutory caravans in the Hospitaller navy.

When Pinto held his solemn entry into Mdina after his election in October 1741, Baldenstein ('De Rinck') was listed as one of the commanders of the Order's cavalry during the ceremony. A detailed description of Ignaz Balthasar's subsequent career would overstep the word-limit of this article; we will therefore concentrate on some important moments.

**"When Fra Ignaz Balthasar von Baldenstein asked to have his portrait painted, Favray was at the height of his faculties"**

Contrary to some of his fellow brethren from the German grand priory who rose to important positions, such as Josef Benedikt von Reinach, a future grand prior whose riotous character caused him to be imprisoned several times, Baldenstein appears to have been on good terms with Grand Master Pinto.

In May 1753, Pinto made him commander of Leuggern. Ignaz Balthasar's elder brother, Josef Wilhelm (1704-1762), had by then become Prince Bishop of Basel. After proving his competence in various commissions ('congregazioni') of the Order, in 1778, Emanuel Rohan-Polduc, the new Grand Master, appointed Ignaz Balthasar Grand Bali (Magnus Baiulius), the representative of the German Grand Prior in the convent. In 1785, he became prior of Dacia, and two years later, prior of Hungary. Both were prestigious positions, though, after the Reformation and the Ottoman occupation of southeast Europe, only titular posts.

When, in October 1796, Grand Prior Josef Benedikt von Reinach died, the Order and the German provincial chapter followed the rules of anciennité (seniority) and on December 10 elected von Baldenstein – then aged 75 – as grand prior. Since the 16th century, the German grand priors' seat had been the castle of Heitersheim (Badensia). From the times of Grand Prior Schilling von Cannstatt in 1548, German grand priors enjoyed the dignity of an imperial prince, and this conferred the status of a principality on the Heitersheim residence and its estates. German grand priors automatically had a seat and vote in the diet of the princes of the empire. In terms of politics and State law, the Heitersheim estates were subject to the viscounts von Hachberg, that is, to the princes of the Breisgau region, and so subordinated to the house of Hapsburg (after the peace treaty of Lunéville, this was the duke of Modena).

Baldenstein took over this office when the German grand priory faced multiple difficulties: the rich Alsatian commanderies had been lost since 1796 with the successful French campaigns into German lands, when various German princes launched secularisation projects against religious orders and their possessions. The spirit among the remaining 22 professed German knights and five priest commanders reached a low ebb.

Supporting Baldenstein in these troubled times was certainly the erudite and hard-working chancellor of the grand priory, the poet and writer Albrecht von Ittner. In preparing the negotiations for the Treaty of Campo Formio, the unification of the Teutonic Order and the German Grand Priory was discussed. Baldenstein – without consulting the convent of the Order – was not against this project, but the head of the Teutonic Knights, Duke Elector Max Franz, refused outright.

The French invasion of Malta in June 1798 has been discussed in extenso. It was then that Malta, after a rather weak resistance, fell to Napoleon. Grand Prior Baldenstein had already in the spring of 1798 received information on the ongoing French plans to conquer Malta and had sent a letter of warning to new Grand Master Hompesch via the Bali Schönau, pointing out "that it is very much connected with your personal honour and the existence of our Order that you [Hompesch] stand firm; if you do not defend our case you will lose your honour in the eyes of all Europe".

Despite Hompesch's failure, the conservative grand prior at first remained loyal to the German Grand Master. Then, various knights started siding with Russian Czar Paul I who, in the meantime, had proclaimed himself the main protector of the Order, and in October 1798 was acclaimed Grand Master by a group of knights. It was only in the summer of 1799 that Rinck von Baldenstein, after strong Austrian pressure, gave in and acknowledged Czar Paul as the new head of the Order. In the course of a visit in early 1800 by a delegation of German knights to St Petersburg to pay homage to the Czar, the German grand prior received the prestigious medal of the Order of Alexander Nevski.

After the murder of Czar Paul on March 11, 1801, a powerful protector of the Order was lost and the future of the German grand priory appeared bleak indeed. Things got more and more out of control for Grand Prior von Baldenstein. By 1801, the possessions of the Order on the left side of the Rhine were irretrievably lost. In theory, this loss should have been compensated by the handing over to the Hospitallers of the monasteries in the region of Breisgau (South Badensia). This, however, would never materialise. In the peace treaty of Lunéville in February 1802, it was stipulated that the Duke of Modena would receive the region of Breisgau. The duke's newly-installed governor of Breisgau, Archduke Ferdinand, adamantly refused to hand over the monasteries to the Knights of Malta.

How far the aged Rinck von Baldenstein had become a puppet in the hands of the 'big' players on the chessboard of European history is shown by the fact that, against the grand prior's wish, the idea to appoint a princely co-adjutor to the grand prior was discussed. This co-adjutor was to be recruited from one of the leading princely families from Austria, Bavaria or Germany, and would help remove the danger of the Order being dispossessed completely. When, after the so-called Third War of the Coalition in autumn 1805, France gained complete control over German politics, the end of the principality of Heitersheim was to become inevitable.

In return for Napoleon's support of the French allies, the Grand Duchy of Baden received the territories of the Order and, in July 1806, the residence of the German grand priory ceased to exist. Grand Duke Karl Friedrich von Baden, however, generously allowed the old grand prior to go on living in the palace of Heitersheim and agreed to a yearly pension of 20,000 Dutch guilders. A few months later, on June 30, 1807, Ignaz Balthasar Willibald Rinck von Baldenstein died and was buried in the parish church of Heitersheim.

Before returning recently to a dotting collector in Malta, this portrait had belonged to another distinguished Malta lover: the historian and writer Frederick W. Ryan (1883-1956), who lived in San Pawl tat-Tarġa for many years and wrote two seminal books about Malta: *The House of the Temple*



A map with all German commanderies.

(1930), about the last years of the Order of Malta in France before the Revolution, and *Malta* (1910), a pithy and sympathetic memoir illustrated by the Italian artist Vittorio Boron.

The painting has a long inscription in Latin on the back, identifying its sitter and his

achievements. The inscription itself cannot be too old, as it is painted on a modern relining of the original canvas. It is possibly copied from an older inscription that had to be covered up to reline the old canvas.

Welcome back, Bali von Baldenstein.